

# "MORE THAN A WOMAN": EARLY MEMOIRS OF BRITISH ACTRESSES\*

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## ABSTRACT

The early decades of the eighteenth century witnessed the rise of fiction that frequently took women's defence of chastity as its subject. In contrast, the first biographies of Restoration and eighteenth-century actresses were not simply moral warnings that chastised women players for loose behavior, but instead offered entertaining accounts of female adventurers who managed to align some semblance of "virtue" with transgressive sexual mores and lowly family origins. I focus on the lives of three celebrated actresses, Nell Gwyn, Lavinia Fenton, and Anne Oldfield to show how a generation of English actresses was memorialized, and how their virtue—or lack of it—could be kept remarkably distinct from their sexual histories.

KEY WORDS: Biography, actresses, eighteenth century, Restoration, virtue, Nell Gwyn, Lavinia Fenton, Anne Oldfield.

## RESUMEN

Las primeras décadas del siglo XVIII fueron testigos del auge de la novela, que frecuentemente tenía como tema la defensa de la castidad de la mujer. En contraste, las primeras biografías de las actrices de la restauración y del siglo XVIII no fueron simplemente advertencias morales que castigaban a las actrices por un comportamiento disoluto, sino que en su lugar ofrecían entretenidas descripciones de aventuras de mujeres que se las arreglaban para alinear alguna semblanza de "virtud" con costumbres sexuales transgresoras y orígenes familiares humildes. Me centraré en la vida de tres célebres actrices: Nell Gwyn, Lavinia Fenton y Anne Oldfield para mostrar cómo una generación de actrices inglesas ha sido conmemorada, y cómo su virtud—o falta de ella—se podía mantener notablemente diferenciada de sus historias sexuales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: biografía, actrices, siglo XVIII, restauración, virtud, Nell Gwyn, Lavinia Fenton, Anne Oldfield.

In Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), the compelling Cinderella-like story of a servant girl's stubborn resistance and eventual marriage to her seductive master, the heroine's *virtue* is synonymous with her *chastity*. In the novel, Pamela protests

that she would willingly prefer to embrace “Rags and Poverty,” rather than forfeit her virginity (15). When Mr B. ultimately accepts her terms and succumbs to her irresistible charms, her wedding gift to him is “an experienced truth, a well-tried virtue, and... [an unequalled] natural meekness and sweetness of disposition” (337), which, the reader is encouraged to agree, serves as a legitimate exchange for his riches. Richardson’s novel, as Jocelyn Harris has acutely noted, transformed contemporary erotica into more palatable moral fare, with a persistent undertone of sexual sizzle (Harris). But the anti-Pamelists, readers who found Pamela’s demurring unconvincing, fastened onto this potential double meaning of the novel in order to mock it. They regarded the heroine of Richardson’s novel, not as an innocent maiden defending her chastity, but as a skilled actress, who cunningly enticed Mr. B. into an improbable marriage. In Henry Fielding’s parody of *Pamela*, she was transformed into the loose-living Shamela, who mockingly flaunted her “vartue,” a cant word that implied her self-interested manipulation of the expectation of chastity, rather than virtue itself. The attempt to define female virtue as something other than a strictly interpreted chastity was consistently and fervently explored throughout the decades leading up to Richardson’s novel.

These early years of the eighteenth century, in addition to witnessing the rise of fictions that took women’s defence of chastity as their subject, considered what it meant to be a woman whose sexuality was publicly evaluated and judged in text and in life. The standard that regulated the behaviour of men, especially aristocratic men, who participated in public life in which their private life was nobody’s business, does not pertain in the same way to public women, who, by their gender and very nature, are operating in a sphere that is not their own. The first biographies of women players on the Restoration and eighteenth-century stage were, not simply moral tales that chastised actresses for unorthodox sexuality, but rather offered entertaining accounts of female adventurers, who managed to align some semblance of “virtue” with an unorthodox sexuality. The biographers of actresses in the several decades just preceding *Pamela*, rather than merely warning young ladies about the dangers of emulating the notorious sexual promiscuity of women players, sometimes attempted to explain and even justify their untoward behaviour.

In this essay, I would like to focus on the lives of three celebrated actresses, Nell Gwyn (1642?-87), Lavinia Fenton (1708-60), and Anne Oldfield (1683-1730), in order to examine the way in which a generation of English actresses was memorialised and the way in which their virtue—or lack of it—was treated. I will argue that these biographical descriptions of the best-known actresses during this early period imply—and not always with a touch of irony—that a woman’s “virtue,” broadly interpreted, could be kept distinct from her sexual behaviour. This argument elaborates upon but also revises the conventional wisdom that Restora-

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tion and eighteenth-century actresses were consistently assumed to be whores.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the fictional Pamela, these real women often sought to improve their social class and economic situation, without benefit of marriage, through wages and patronage. For the first time in history, celebrity made possible real social mobility for actresses, who often came from the lower ranks. Lavinia Fenton, for example, became the mistress of the Duke of Bolton and eventually married him after the death of his wife; and Anne Oldfield, though openly a mistress to Arthur Maynwaring and Charles Churchill, became a wealthy and respected woman, who was known to keep company with ladies of quality.<sup>2</sup>

Though the actual life of Nell Gwyn, a Restoration actress and Charles II's mistress, precedes the period in discussion here, the first full-length memoir about her was written in the mid-eighteenth century. A plethora of broadsides, satires, and ballads abound, and information about her is often difficult to extricate from the many apocryphal legends. *Memoirs of the Life of Eleanor Gwynn, A Celebrated Courtesan, in the Reign of King Charles I and Mistress to that Monarch* (London, 1752), an anonymous publication, offered the first full-length life story at more than half a century's distance from her death. The memoir followed the pattern of the popular whore and rogue biographies that were influential on the nascent novel during the early eighteenth century. Illustrated by a frontispiece of a bare-breasted Gwyn, it traced her rise from being the daughter of a tradesman "in mean Circumstances" to becoming the king's most celebrated courtesan (1). According to this version of her life, Gwyn turned to acting as the last refuge of a poverty-stricken girl struggling to find her way in London, an avenue that seemed natural for a strikingly beautiful woman with limited skills: "At least, if she could not wear the Buskin with Success, she could see no Objection to her appearing as a Lady in waiting, or one of the Maids of the Bedchamber to the Queens of the Stage." Her preference, however, according to the anonymous memoirist, was to *become* royalty, rather than merely impersonating it: "if not a Queen, a[t] least the Mistress of a Monarch" (7). The biography, in other words, described Gwyn as steadily improving her status in a calculated way by advancing from being the mistress of Thomas Betterton to that of a player named Deziel, and then on to Lord Rupert, the Earl of Meredith, Lord Wilmot, and finally the king, though in fact her actual list of lovers was even more extensive. The narrative portrayed her as a conniving opportunist, who managed her meteoric rise because of her talent for quick, sprightly conversation deliv-

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Rosenthal has emphasised the importance of the sign of the whore as applied to the actress (8). For a counter-argument to Rosenthal, see Deborah Payne, "Reified Object or Emergent Professional? Rethorizing the Restoration Actress," *Cultural Readings of Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Theatre*, ed. J. Douglas Canfield and Deborah Payne (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1995) 13-38. It would be instructive, I think, for critics of the eighteenth-century theatre to distinguish in a nuanced fashion among actual prostitutes, mistresses, and actresses who simply enjoyed unorthodox sex lives, and I have attempted to begin that calibration here.

<sup>2</sup> See also my "Actresses and the Economics of Celebrity, 1700-1800," *Celebrity and British Theatre, 1660-2000*, ed. Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (London: Palgrave, 2005) 148-68.



ered with polite candour: “She inherited a great deal of Wit and good Sense; and had great Promptitude at Repartees” (21). She is praised, too, for having displayed the great good sense to realise that she could not aspire to be the wife of a man of means, but only a mistress.

The memoir, then, is not so much the biography of an actress as a whore’s progress that leads to impersonating a lady of quality. Though the narrative praises her beauty, it faults her as a player on stage when it came to elocution, dignity, keen understanding, and gracefulness. In her brief acting career, Gwyn was best known for her *ingénue* roles, in plays written by John Dryden, Robert Howard, and Charles Sedley. As an actress, her greatest power lay not in her parts but at the edges of her role, when she was “speaking an Epilogue... with a striking Air of Coquetishness and Levity” (19), as if to emphasise the linkages between her role in the play and her life at the stage’s periphery. Reciting an epilogue, Gwyn would have engaged the audience both as herself and in character, as, for example, when the tragic heroine seemed to rise from the dead to speak, as Nell Gwyn, a comic epilogue at the end of *Tyrannick Love* (1669), while still wearing her costume as Valeria: “Here Nelly lies, who, though she liv’d a Slater’n,/ Yet dy’d a Princess acting in S. Cathar’n” (Dryden). The epilogue required a particular kind of skill sufficiently removed from the play itself, one that established a public persona and allowed the audience to assess her simultaneously as actress and person, as a real individual as well as a character.

In fact, of course, Gwyn’s public identity as the king’s whore and mother of his bastard children became well known, and King Charles II underscored this identity by treating her as a mistress, rather than as a respected professional actress. Yet, though Gwyn was lacking in chastity according to these *Memoirs*, her virtue was several times bolstered with reference to her *charity*. She was credited with displaying her good nature through acts of generosity and benevolence that would have been regarded as characteristic of a gentlewoman. In particular, her kindness to English Civil War veterans, in providing care to the wounded, was explained in some detail: “Another Act of Generosity, which raised the Character above any Courtezian in those or any other Times, was her Solicitudude to effect the Institution of the *Chelsea Hospital*” (46). In sum, “she was a Lady of distinguished Talents: she united Wit, Beauty and Benevolence, and if she deserves Blame for want of Chastity, there are few who challenge such lavish Encomiums for other moral Qualities” (60). Chastity, then, was only one aspect of a woman’s morality, though perhaps the dominant one. The centrality of her sexual life relegated her acting to incidental significance in defining her lasting identity, but the memoirist’s attention to her benevolence made her “*vartue*” seem sufficient to attract a prince.

In contrast, the anonymous *Life of Lavinia Beswick, alias Fenton, alias Polly Peachum* (London, 1728) maintained from the outset that acting was central to Fenton’s life. Among the first women celebrities, Fenton’s singing and acting as the heroine in John Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera* (1728) skyrocketed her to fame. A raunchy broadsheet, *The Whole Life of Polly Peachum; Containing an Account of Her Birth, Parentage and Education* (London, n.d.), written just after the play opened, recounts how “Polly Peachum... jumpt from an Orange Girl to an Actress on the Stage, and from that to be a Lady of Fortune.” As in the Nell Gwyn memoir, sexuality is again



a powerful theme. During Fenton's young life, described with distant, amused irony, she early became "a Sacrifice to *Priapus*" (14). Comparing her to fictional adventurers Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders, the memoirist noted, with sympathy, that she was a fatherless love-child, until her mother, a barmaid and occasional inhabitant of Old Bailey, married her stepfather, Fenton. Having much in common with the popular amatory fictions written by Aphra Behn, Delariviere Manley, and Eliza Haywood during the same period, the memoir focussed on Lavinia Fenton's seductive charms and the sparks who pursued her, though the thread of her enduring love for a feckless Portuguese nobleman is interwoven throughout. Appearing to sympathise with her unfortunate plight, the biographer offered samples of the numerous missives from admirers that Fenton, like other prominent actresses, found herself having to scrutinise, fend off, or accept. Fenton's lively abilities deemed her to be worthy of a stage career in the memoirist's eyes but also aligned her with prostitution: "Polly becoming now the most celebrated Toast in the Town, she gain'd new Admirers every Time she appear'd on the Stage, and Persons of the highest Rank and Quality made Love to her; insomuch, that by the Presents she has received, she lives in Ease and Plenty, keeps her Servants, and appears abroad in as much Magnificence as a Lady" (33). In other words, her achievement as an actress, her accumulation of wealth, and her passing on occasion as a woman of rank occurred because of her sexual attractiveness alone, rather than her talent and skill. At the same time that she was ostensibly absolved from being a common whore, her willingness to accept "a Diamond Ring, a green Purse, a Watch... Snuff-Box or some valuable Trincklet" from admirers is sneeringly noted (34). Her success is thus attributed to male patrons and mentors, as it is in other popular pamphlets or broadsides that remark upon the high fees she allegedly charged, not for acting, but for prostitution: "*A hundred Guineas for a Nights Debauch*" (34). The question raised about Fenton, as for other actresses in these life accounts, concerns the legitimacy of the means by which they rose to wealth and whether their talent as a player justified their apparent class mobility; but the possibility that Fenton possessed a certain kind of virtue in spite of her sexual behaviour is forwarded as a plausible interpretation.

Fenton's memoir liberally criticises her, but it gives way, in the later part, to muted admiration for the high quality of her performance as Cherry in George Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem*, in which she merited an increase in pay from the paltry thirty shillings per week with which she began. Such a fee would still have been modest, but it would have been the equivalent to more than a common labourer's pay (though less than a curate's), not counting the benefits or gifts that she received (Copeland 29). The memoir thus becomes less a story of poverty than a clever actress's ability to earn and accrue funds sufficient to grant charity to neighbours, bail out her Portuguese nobleman lover from a debtor's prison, and offer "*Humanity to the Distressed*," as the title-page advertises. In fact, one could certainly argue that a significant theme of the biography was admiration or Fenton's remarkable ease in seeming to be a lady of quality in spite of her lowly origins and her marginal status as a working woman: "I think she may pass for an accomplish'd worthy Lady, *if the Publick will allow an Actress the Title*" (47). This last phrase — "if the Publick will allow an Actress the Title" — is no small caveat, but the gist of the





biography is to assert that Fenton, though contaminated by the company she kept, through grit and ingenuity, earned the right to become accepted as a woman who improved her status through her own merit.

Several of Fenton's talents are mentioned with some cynicism, including her penning a poem in which she defends her freedom to remain a mistress, rather than become wife to a fop. But running counter to the rather sardonic tone of the narrator is substantial praise for Fenton, whose name became permanently identified with her explosively popular role as Polly Peachum. The memoirist expresses considerable admiration —if tongue-in-cheek— not only for her stage career, but also her knack for attracting admirers and gaining sexual attention.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, after promising to provide “Proofs of her *Ingenuity, Wit, and Smart Repartees*,” he praises her genius as witnessed in social situations. Here, as in later memoirs of Fenton and other actresses, there is great emphasis on the high quality of her conversation to entertain and to soothe. The memoir was somewhat prophetic, for Fenton left the stage shortly after its publication to become the mistress of the Duke of Bolton, whom she finally married several decades later after the death of his wife. In short, Fenton's memoirs explained and excused her being welcomed into the best circles with women of rank, in spite of her sexual profligacy, because of her inherent good taste and accomplished conversation. Her sexual behaviour was made to seem an inevitable consequence of her profession and thus not a matter of will, and Fenton's memoir implies that a celebrated actress's worth might be evaluated separately from it.

The recurring theme of valuing these public women in spite of their unconventional sexual behaviour becomes much more prominent in the several memoirs of Anne Oldfield. The various biographical tracts written about Oldfield justified her being treated as a woman of the upper echelons in spite of her failure to satisfy conventional norms. Oldfield was the subject of two biographies published shortly after her death: *Authentick Memoirs of the Life of That Celebrated Actress Mrs. Ann Oldfield* (London, 1730), which ran to six editions in the first year;<sup>4</sup> and William Egerton [Edmund Curll], *Faithful Memoirs of the Life, Amours, and Performances of That Justly Celebrated, and Most Eminent Actress of Her Time, Mrs. Anne Oldfield* (London, 1731). A later version of the “Egerton” memoir was abridged and added to Thomas Betterton's *The History of the English Stage, from the Restauration [sic] to the Present Time* (London, 1741). The first memoir competes for veracity with the later one that had been announced at the time of publication, and it is accused in advance of “pack[ing] together a gross Collection of Absurdities” (12). Edmund Curll's biography of Robert Wilks (1733) and Benjamin Victor's of Barton Booth

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<sup>3</sup> My argument differs somewhat from that of Cheryl Wanko who emphasises that the *Life of Fenton* presents the actress as a “gold digger” and that the memoir “denies her public achievement and condemns her path of upward mobility.” *Roles of Authority: Thespian Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Lubbock: Texas Tech UP, 2003) 58, 60.

<sup>4</sup> I am citing the 3rd ed. (1730) unless otherwise noted.



(1733) were also written near the same time as these memoirs,<sup>5</sup> and Colley Cibber complains in his *Apology* about the new tendency to follow, in an unseemly hurry, an actor's death with a published life story (6-7).

Oldfield's memoirs are remarkable because they are the first full-length biographies to describe an actress as a credible professional. In part, the task for Oldfield's biographers was to extricate her person from the sexual sins, real and imagined, of her predecessors. *Authentick Memoirs* (1730), the first of Oldfield's memoirs to appear, was an encomium that took pains to rank her, in both comedy and tragedy, as the equal to Wilks, who frequently played opposite her. The popular and talented pair starred together as Plume and Silvia in Farquhar's *Recruiting Officer*, as Archer and Mrs. Sullen in Farquhar's *Beaux' Stratagem*, Valentine and Angelica in William Congreve's *Love for Love*, and as Careless and Lady Dainty in Cibber's *The Double Gallant; or, The Sick Lady's Cure*. The sole exception to the memoirist's praise for her is the accusation that Oldfield engaged in one "ungenerous action," for having stolen Mr F —e from his wife and children but later persuading him to return to his family as she sincerely repented of her "misspent Life" (6th ed. [1730] 41). As in the case of Fenton, the memoirist explains her misstep as a professional hazard, that ought to be excused by recognising that she was surrounded by flatterers. This is swiftly followed by a reference to the proof of her excellence, in having earned £150 each year, rising to as much as £500, plus substantial profits from benefit nights. Oldfield's worth as a woman was thus complicated by her star power and her ability to earn money. If her life story did not provide a sterling model of behaviour for young girls, it did offer a gripping fantasy of independence and of escape from class strictures.

Even more than in Fenton's life, the emphasis in the 1730 memoir is on Oldfield's deserving to be the universal delight of the "beau monde" in spite of her sexual adventures. Inclined to the theatre from an early age, Oldfield's ascent on the stage is ascribed to her magnetism and acting talent. Exhibiting an appeal across class divisions, Oldfield's acting charmed the boxes and delighted the pit: "Ev'n the Pert Templer, and the City Prig, / Who come to Plays to show their Wit —or Wig" (44). The gentlemen and ladies in the audience, seeming to be part of the theatrical properties and resembling the players on stage, were metonymically signified as wigs or costume accessories, when Oldfield (in a contest with Elizabeth Barry) caused "Effusion among the *Toupees*, and fluttering of *Fans* among the *Ladies*" (20). Levelling out the distance between gentlemanly playgoers and the lowly female player, the narrative assumes that the reader shares the attitude of a captivated male spectator, enchanted by Oldfield's performance, who would himself long to play opposite the convincing actress on the stage: "Who that has seen her *Angelica* in *Love for Love*, but would, like *Valentine*, have made away with all to have obtained her!... so irresistable [sic] was she in every Character she personated" (23).

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<sup>5</sup> Edmund Curll, *The Life of That Eminent Comedian Robert Wilks, Esq.* (London, 1733); and Benjamin Victor, *Memoirs of the Life of Barton Booth, Esq.* (London, 1733).



The first of these several memoirs concerning Anne Oldfield also countered her eccentric if excusable sexual behaviour with high praise for her aesthetic judgement, including her elevated taste in painting, poetry, drama, and even politics: “She is such a Judge of Painting, that the greatest of our Modern Artists in their Profession are glad to have her Opinion of a Piece before it is shewn to the World, knowing, that if it escapes her Censure, it will gain the Approbation of the whole Town; for she is so Nice in the Discovery of an Error, that it’s as impossible to deceive her, as it is to express her Strength of Fancy” (6th ed. [1730] 43). Her skill in repartee meant that her wit might even have been construed to be superior to her considerable beauty. Yet there is a double edge to the conclusion of the biographical “A Poem to the Memory of Mrs. Oldfield,” which asserts that Oldfield compelled the spectator or reader to ignore her unorthodox actions because of the quality of her thespian achievement: “She spoilt, against her will, the Poet’s Aim; / Making those Follies which we should despise, / When seen in her, seem Virtues in our Eyes” (44). Irregular sexual behaviour was transformed into something valuable and even virtuous in her person through the theatrical magic of her dramatic characterisations.

The second narrative of Oldfield’s life, *The Faithful Memoirs* (1731), consists of a miscellany of documents related to Oldfield’s life, rather than a linear narrative. It includes details of her life, the principal parts she performed, and a defence of the English stage to counter the antitheatrical sentiments in letters that also offer the beginnings of dramatic criticism. *Faithful Memoirs* defines Oldfield in terms of her friendships and affairs, her parts, her politics, and her epilogues. Sections on actress Mary Anne Campion, the Duke of Devonshire, and William Wycherley’s marriage fill out the narrative with bits that were only tangentially related to Oldfield’s life, but the *Memoir* returns to its subject to discuss her last original role as Sophonisba, as well as her illness, death, funeral oration, will, and effects. It also incorporates poems, some of which commemorated her, but others of which had only the vaguest connections to the theatre.

In *Faithful Memoirs*, the argument switches course to suggest that Oldfield was not of exemplary virtue because she lacked sufficient reflection on her behaviour. At the outset, the title-page offers an apparent critique of Oldfield’s life, citing Rochefoucault: “The great Pains, which the Ladies of this Age take to commend Virtue, is sometimes a shrewd Sign that they take but very little to practice it. And, the greatest Part of those complaints against their Neighbours, are owing to the Want of Reflection upon Themselves.” If the stage was supposed to inculcate morals, Oldfield was judged, at least in reference to this passage, as personally derelict. But, at the same time, it was her successful impersonation of roles that instructed the audience by moving their emotions, as was noted with admiration in her funeral oration: “What harden’d Heart wept not with *Andromache*? What Mother did she not instruct in Maternal Love when *Astynax*’s Danger wrings her Soul?” (153). Oldfield’s principal roles served as examples of reform flowing from a stage that inculcated virtue and punished vice. Just as the 1731 memoir argues that spectators benefitted from watching Oldfield’s instructive tragic roles, the susceptible spectators were also purportedly challenged by her comic roles to behave morally: “What Woman so lost in a Crowd of Cards, and good Company which the Repentance of





my Lady *Townley* could not teach to reform? What Coquet so abandoned to her Folly whom the ridiculous Behaviour of Lady *Betty Modish* could not make detest her Vanity? What Character did she appear in private or publick Life which she could not make Amiable? On the Stage so easy did the Poets Language flow from her, it might well be taken for her own Sentiments; and in private all she spoke, all she did, carry'd that agreeable Air, that every thing sat upon her with the same genteel Neglect, her Cloaths did; unaffected gay, but politley Neat" (153). Because the sentiments of the character appeared, to the audience, to reflect Oldfield's own indictment of Lady Betty's coquettish folly as she melded her acting skill together with her person, she could be forgiven her affairs with Maynwaring and Churchill. In fact, as "A Poem to the Memory of Mrs. Oldfield" had claimed, *she* set the standard for actual gentlewomen, rather than the reverse: "Such finish'd Breeding, so polite a Taste, / Her Fancy always for the Fashion past" (42).

By ending with a panegyric "Funeral Oration for Mrs. Oldfield," the 1731 biography seemed to claim finally that Oldfield was the exception to the ladies of the age, for "she taught Virtue in such persuasive Accents, that the Hearers have been with Immitation fired, and wished they so could Act that so they may Instruct, and so instructing be adored like her" (152). She, like Fenwick, was judged to exceed the expectations of "woman." She is compared to a phoenix, "for as far as Nature exceeds Art, so far did she excell all the Women of her Time" (153-54). In sum, her public fame ultimately took precedence over any quibbles about her private life.

Much more than the biographies of Gwyn or Fenton, Oldfield's memoirs depicted acting as central to her identity. This approach makes them unique in the history of such women's life stories. The final *Memoirs of Mrs. Anne Oldfield* (1741) was published as a separate addendum to *The History of the English Stage, from the Restauration to the Present Time*, attributed to Thomas Betterton but compiled by William Oldys and Edmund Curl from his papers. This abridgement of the 1731 memoirs focussed on the principal narration of the earlier version but omitted the summation of her life, four poems on her death, the list of epilogues and plays in which she appeared, and the inventory of her estate and her effects. Both versions—full-length and abridged—emphasised Oldfield's epilogues, those moments at the ending of the plays when the actress seemed most modern and most herself, as she migrated to the stage's periphery. As much a history of other actresses contemporary to Oldfield as it was her exclusive biography, the memoir demonstrated the actress's courage in blazing the trail for other women in, for example, her epilogue on the parliament of women, her rant against vile husbands, and her argument for a woman's right to divorce and remarry when faced with an unfaithful husband. She acted as intermediary to the audience as the epilogue's speaker, who resembled both the actress and the character, but who was not solely herself or her part.<sup>6</sup> In

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<sup>6</sup> Mary E. Knapp provides an excellent study of the performance of prologues and epilogues, *Prologues and Epilogues of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1961).



particular, the comic epilogue to the tragic *Distrest Mother*, spoken by Oldfield as the widowed Andromache, became an opportunity for her to seem to defend her lover Maynwaring and their relationship after his death. The 1741 memoir includes Eustace Budgell's ribald epilogue to *The Distrest Mother* spoken by Anne Oldfield, a gossipy afterpiece to which Richardson's Pamela had taken exception. The memoir calls the epilogue, in which Oldfield mocks her character's scrupulous moral decisions, "very humourous," an opinion quite distinct from Pamela's reaction. Instead, Pamela complains to Lady Davers, "I was extremely mortify'd to see my favourite (and the only perfect) Character, debas'd and despoil'd, and the Widow of *Hector*, Prince of *Troy*, talking Nastiness to an Audience, and setting it out with all the wicked Graces of Action, and affected Archness of Looks, Attitude, and Emphasis." Pamela, of course, misses the irony of Oldfield's stance on her character. Though spectators like Pamela may have been offended, the memoir glosses over any potential moral harm that might result to the audience from the very popular epilogue.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Oldfield's reciting the comic epilogue to *Phaedra and Hippolitus* bridged the gap between classical history and current events in the eighteenth century, to become a witty injunction to modern women, who were cajoled to remain chaste, unlike the unfaithful Phaedra. Oldfield is represented as attempting to elevate the flagging morality of the theatre for people of quality, "especially the Ladies" ([1731 and 1741] 10), an idea that ran counter to the assumption that her performances pleased primarily male spectators. These prologues and epilogues made the plays seem startlingly personal and current, and they helped to bridge the temporal gap between a historical or classical play and its actual moment of presentation.

Oldfield justly earned a reputation as a consummate actress, and her unconventional sexual behaviour paradoxically became a sign of her brilliant natural talent, as if she had not laboured to learn a demanding craft or to pursue the mundane task of earning a living. In the first memoir, the reader was encouraged generously to grant her the "Grains of Allowance to those whose excentric Genius move about their Orb, that is to say, to those whose petty Failings have superiour Excellencies to all such Cavillers" (26). The memoir also relates the unconventional love story of Oldfield and Maynwaring (and later Charles Churchill) in a manner designed to justify a nation's adulation. Maynwaring, though excused by his nobility, is acknowledged to be the alcoholic spendthrift that he was, and much of the memoir turns out to be a defence of him, rather than her. The two actors' fates and public reputations were, of course, intertwined, to such an extent that his death was testified as not resulting from venereal disease, "to clear up the unjust Aspersion cast on

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<sup>7</sup> *The Spectator* No. 341 (April 1, 1712) entered the controversy, in a paper ascribed to Budgell, by asserting that Mrs. Oldfield was no longer Andromache when she spoke the "facetious Epilogue" after the end of the play: "every one knows that on the British Stage they are distinct Performances by themselves, Pieces entirely detached from the play, and no way essential to it." *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965) III:266-67. See Knapp 296-97.

*Mrs. Oldfield* ([1731] 40; [1741] 29), and, perhaps, to dissociate her from any association with Nell Gwyn, whose death was suspect. Neither is Oldfield's giving birth to illegitimate progeny, one son each with Maynswaring and Churchill, condemned. In addition to being a legitimate object of desire, the actress is portrayed as a kind of ideal mother, whose generosity appropriately merited deep affection from the men of means who fathered her children. For example, her willingness to bequeath money to her sons, including sufficient funds for one son to buy a coveted place in the Horseguards, is turned into an indication that her high character was worthy of Maynswaring, "a Gentleman of one of the best Families in *Great-Britain*, as well as a Man of the most exquisite and refin'd Taste, and most unquestion'd Judgment" ([1730] 24). In short, the memoirs were testaments to Oldfield's munificence and to her ability to amass a fortune equal to twice the estate that Maynswaring left; and the 1731 biography lists the details of rich tapestries, jewels, books, paintings, linens, japanned screens and chests among her possessions.

Actresses in particular were credited with making social comedies and she-tragedies relevant to people's lives, thus erasing the distinction between theatre and life. When Oldfield acted as Calista in Nicholas Rowe's *Fair Penitent* (1725), "she appear'd with such a noble Grandeur in her Person, that it were to be wish'd some of our modern Ladies of Quality could learn in their Turn to personate *Mrs. Oldfield*; So infinitely did the Copy transcend the Original, and so much more amiable did they appear when represented by *Mrs. Oldfield*, when at home with their Lords" (6th ed. [1730] 38). This sympathetic portrayal as the seduced maiden of "she-tragedy" speaks to the complexity of combining virtue with lost chastity. William Chetwood wrote, "Her excellent clear Voice of Passion, her piercing flaming Eye, with Manner and Action suiting, us'd to make me shrink with Awe... and though *Mr. Booth* played *Lothario* I could hardly leg him up to the Importance of triumphing over such a finish'd Piece of Perfection, that seemed to be too much dignified to lose her Virtue" (Chetwood 201-02; Lafler 146-48). The heroine ultimately succumbed to the cunning *Lothario* instead of turning to *Altamont*, to whom she was betrothed by her father. Calista afforded a splendid role that would have enticed audiences to draw parallels with Oldfield's real life, and she played the part at least twice each year, until she chose it for her benefit night in 1730, her last year of performing. In yet another theatrical example of virginity lost, Oldfield was credited with *becoming* Jane Shore, at once a queen and a woman who needed to be forgiven, as in the epilogue to the play: "Then judge the *fair Offender* with good Nature, / And let your Fellow-feeling curb your Satire. / What if our Neighbours have some little Failing / Must we needs fall to damning and to railing; / For her Excuse too, be it understood, / That if the Woman was not quite so good, / Her Lover was a King, she Flesh and Blood" ([1731] 75). In pitying Oldfield, who made this plea as Jane Shore, the audience was cajoled into forgiving the actress's own moral lapses.

But, perhaps, the most noteworthy and memorable character that Oldfield played was that of the charmingly duplicitous Lady Betty Modish, in Colley Cibber's sentimental comedy, *The Careless Husband*, produced for the first time at Drury Lane, 7 December 1704. The play also featured her popular co-star Robert Wilks





as Sir Charles Easy, the careless husband of the title. Cibber almost certainly modelled the role after Anne Oldfield, who owned the part during her lifetime; and the play, like *Fair Penitent* and *Jane Shore*, teases the audience with its close blending of life and myth. The *Faithful Memoirs* includes *verbatim* an entire scene between Lady Easy and Lady Betty Modish (II.i); and, though the 1741 version omits the scene, it dates Oldfield's birth as an actress from her performance of this part. Her "real Character" is revealed through the "imaginary one of Lady Betty Modish" in regard to her dress, charm, "Wit, Raillery, and Conversation" (11). The part exemplifies Oldfield's straddling her public and private roles. Though Cibber apparently created the part with her in mind, Thomas Davies notes in his *Dramatic Miscellanies* that Oldfield seemed to have invented the words of her character as if she had spoken them in her own life: "By being a welcome and constant visitor to families of distinction, Mrs. Oldfield acquired an elegant and graceful deportment in representing women of high rank. She expressed the sentiments of Lady Betty Modish and Lady Townly in a manner so easy, natural, and flowing, and so like to her common conversation, that they appeared to be her own genuine conception" (Davies, vol. III 433-34). *The Careless Husband* also animates the ongoing debate over an actress's virtue versus her chastity, seeming to allow the character Lady Modish's rank to compensate for the actress Oldfield's sexual behaviour.

Demonstrating that Oldfield's natural character was equal to the peer's daughter she played, Cibber set the play's scenes of spirited exchange in Windsor Castle, where he imagined that the actress had engaged with ladies of quality in similar conversations. Lady Modish relishes the power of her beauty to torment Lord Morelove, whose solid morality contrasts at once with Sir Charles Easy's libertine tendencies and the studied extravagance of Lord Foppington (played by Colley Cibber), with whom she shares delight in being à la mode as a means of accruing power. Because Lady Modish's authority resides in her beauty and costume, she boldly asserts that "A new fashion upon a fine woman is often a greater proof of her value than you are aware of" (Cibber, *Careless* vol II.i). Manipulating this power, she displays apparent indifference to Morelove (who adores her) for the bulk of the play, as a feminine counterpoint to Sir Charles Easy's casual infidelity. Though Lady Modish publicly displays contempt for reputation, the play reins her in at the end to exemplify virtue. If the play draws upon racy Restoration themes in a toned-down eighteenth-century context, Lady Modish stands between Restoration heroines, such as Congreve's Millamant, and eighteenth-century comic sentimental heroines in what has been called the first sentimental comedy because of the reformation scene at its conclusion.<sup>8</sup>

Lady Modish's power derives, in part, from studied attention to high fashion, a trait for which Oldfield was also known. Wearing beautiful clothing brought feminine sway, while public reputation—for which Lady Modish claimed to care not a fig—resembled exotic deformity: "One shall not see an homely creature in

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<sup>8</sup> See William W. Appleton's introduction to Cibber, *The Careless Husband* ix-xvi.

town but wears it in her mouth as monstrously as the Indians do bobs at their lips, and it really becomes 'em just alike" (II.i). The resolution of the plot relies on a fashionable stage property, the famous steinkirk scarf that Lady Easy dangled from her philandering husband's neck as material proof of his adultery. The lady's scarf—not the fop's periwig, cravat, hat, or even his snuffbox—unfolds the moral of the drama. Yet the play's other fashion-plate, Lord Foppington, comes to possess a masculine piece of stage business that threatens Modish's relationship with Morelove, and she demands its return. For Lady Betty Modish, the snuff box that Morelove gave her as a talisman of his love is transformed into "a lady's utensil" to suggest that even male properties could become female possessions in the theatre (III). The male characters challenge Lady Modish's reckless courage, and the women are jealous of it, making her character a paradigm of the actress who plays her.

When it becomes clear that no amount of new-fashioning of the scarf will change the circumstances of Sir Charles's exposure, the women show themselves to be the reformers of men, though not before the chastened Sir Charles Easy lectures Lady Betty Modish, as if speaking directly to Oldfield: "But the noble conquest you have gained at last, over defeated sense of reputation, too, has made your fame immortal. Ay, madam, your reputation... I say, your reputation; 't has been your life's whole pride of late to be the common toast of every public table, vain even in the infamous addresses of a married man, my Lord Foppington; let that be reconciled with reputation" (V.vii). Particularly regretting the *public* nature of the slights she had shown Morelove, Lady Betty wins her lover and regains her reputation.

Empowered by her quick tongue and sheer attractiveness, the illustrious Oldfield embodied the contradictions of an actress who played on and competed with her own personal reputation. Her memoirs drew the parallel very tightly when Cibber was quoted as saying "that almost every Sentence, in the Part, may with Justice be said to have been heard from her own Mouth before she pronounced it on the Stage. In short, it was not the Part of Lady Betty Modish, represented by Mrs. *Oldfield*; but it was the real Mrs. *Oldfield* who appeared in the Character of Lady *Betty Modish*" ([1731] 3). In other words, as the subject of early theatre biography, Oldfield was credited with a nearly seamless assumption of a role and a social class that was attested to be already inherent within her character while acknowledging her less-than-perfect sexual reputation.<sup>9</sup> She was "the *Greatest Lady* in *England*" (38), and "the *Brightest Actress Britain* e'er did yield" (146). At the same time, the theatre was "aptly calculated for the forming [of] a free-born People," according to *The History of the English Stage* (124), and Oldfield was portrayed as its national treasure. Oldfield was thus represented as a woman exemplary of the English nation, and one who richly deserved the honour of being buried in the national monument, Westminster Abbey, an honour previously limited to Thomas and Mary Betterton.

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<sup>9</sup> For example, Joanne Lafler reports that the Earl and Countess of Bristol, as well as John, Lord Hervey, were among Oldfield's aristocratic friends (123).

In sum, the taint of the whore follows Nell Gwyn, Lavinia Fenton, and Anne Oldfield into their mingling with those of higher rank, but it would be too simple to say that, in these memoirs, they were absolved of their sins simply because they travelled in circles of quality. The memoirs—and some of the plays in which they acted, and the epilogues that they recited—often offered excuses for the actress's missteps, rather than condemnation, and they seemed to suggest, in a not entirely uncomplimentary fashion, that actresses were in a category not contained by "woman." As Fenton's biographer puts it, "For sure she was more than Woman" (42). This sentiment is both derisive and admiring, but identifying these women primarily by their sexual activities or lack of them—as prostitutes, mistresses, or even as chaste women—is, if we attend carefully to the subtleties of their biographies, often an inadequate and skewed understanding of how they were perceived. Oldfield's 1730 memoirist argues this most forcefully: the celebrated actress "endeavour'd by a sincere Repentance to make all the Atonement that lay in her Power for a misspent Life; and indeed how could it be expected otherwise, from a Person who had been from her Youth immersed in Vanity, surrounded with Flattery, and inur'd to a profuse Way of living? most Women, I believe, in her condition would have done as much, few would have done better, and many would have done much worse" (6th ed. [1730] 41). The separation between public and private virtue was being negotiated in these memoirs in a way that would be resolved quite differently in James Boaden's memoir of Sarah Siddons in the early nineteenth century: "Her PRIVATE life! What is there, then, in the private life of the *most excellent* wife, mother, sister, friend, the *detail* of which could be interesting to the public? The duties of such a character are unobtrusive, unostentatious, and avoid the pen of history. They confer the BEST OF BLESSINGS; but they shun all record and reward, save the internal consciousness, which renders every other, in this life, of little moment" (Boaden I:15). In contrast, these eighteenth-century memoirs attest that each actress, though sexually unorthodox in her private life, was charitable and generous; and, in the cases of Fenwick and Oldfield, each was possessed of immense natural talent that merited them a social mobility in spite of their private behaviour. As popular and visible public women, they acted as surrogates for the new bourgeoisie aspiring to assume a new kind of celebrated, impersonated nobility that could be achieved, rather than inherited.

The memoirs of Anne Oldfield were the first substantial accounts of an actress's life, but the first autobiographical account, in which an actress narrates her own life, did not appear until Charlotte Charke's *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke, Written by Herself*, in 1755. Until that time, the narratives that most resemble autobiographical writing are, perhaps, Jane Rogers' short memorial (1712) and Kitty Clive's protests (1744), mere fragments of self-representation but courageous defences of their rights as working women. No wonder, then, that the theatre audience, hungry for juicy titbits and private information about these strong-minded women, interpreted their roles, as well as their spoken prologues and epilogues, as affording authentic glimpses into actresses' private lives. Unlike the later more scandalous memoirs, such as those of Peg Woffington (1760), George Anne Bellamy (1785), and Elizabeth Gooch (1792), these early memoirs display ambivalent attitudes toward women in the public sphere, who were carving out their right



to earn a substantial living while redefining “virtue.” The actress’s body on stage, that instrument for combining the labour of acting with sex work, held virtue together with public display in unstable proportion. These early memoirs convey both the impulse to explain and to forgive; the impulse to condemn and yet to entertain the possibility that celebrated women of the theatre, in the first half of the eighteenth century, might prosper while living their ostensibly “private” lives by an inconsistent moral standard that reigning definitions of “woman” could not contain.

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