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Re-gendering the Libertine; or, the Taming of the Rake: Lucy Vestris as Don Giovanni on the early nineteenth-century London stage

RACHEL COWGILL

When Luigi Bassi entered the stage of the Prague National Theatre in 1787 to create the title role of Mozart and Da Ponte's *Don Giovanni*, he could have drawn inspiration from a rich tradition of theatrical, pantomimic and marionette representations of the legendary Don Juan, to which this new opera was the latest contribution.¹ Previous incarnations had been shaped by the likes of Tirso de Molina, Molière, Shadwell, Purcell and Gluck; yet it is Mozart and Da Ponte's version that has for us become the definitive: the Don as paradox; an uncomfortable blend of the despicable and the admirable, hero and anti-hero. Lecher, rapist, liar, cheat, murderer, he is the brutal epitome of macho striving for power and domination, yet clothed with a seductive panache, conviction and bravado – the reckless-heroic libertine phallocrat who would rather face the fires of eternal damnation than curb his appetites.

A hothouse study in sexual tensions, *Don Giovanni* has provoked a range of responses that reveals shifts in sexual mores and gender-formation over the last two centuries. A substantial subgroup within this body of material are the sequels that take up the action where Mozart and Da Ponte left off, giving theme and character a new context or twist. *After the Death of Don Juan* by Sylvia Townsend Warner and *Don Juan in the Village* by Jane DeLynn are relatively recent examples of this phenomenon, and the fact that writers continue to grapple with the issues raised by the Don and his exploits testifies to their potency and universality.²

An intriguing example of sequel-as-reception is *Giovanni in London, or The Libertine Reclaimed*, a 'comic extravaganza entertainment' written for London's Olympic Theatre by William Thomas Moncrieff. Premiered on 26 December 1817, it was one of a series of popular spin-offs on the Don Juan theme, triggered by the long-awaited and phenomenally successful London première of Mozart and Da Ponte's opera at the King's Theatre just nine months earlier. However, *Giovanni in London* was brought out at the Olympic not for the latest fashionable Italian baritone

¹ See Oscar Mandel, ed., *The Theatre of Don Juan: A Collection of Plays and Views, 1630–1963* (Lincoln, 1963); J. W. Smeed, *Don Juan: Variations on a Theme* (London, 1990); Charles C. Russell, *The Don Juan Legend Before Mozart, with a Collection of Eighteenth-Century Opera Librettos* (Ann Arbor, 1993); Jonathan Miller, ed., *The Don Giovanni Book: Myths of Seduction and Betrayal* (London, 1990); Julian Rushton, *W. A. Mozart: 'Don Giovanni'*, Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge, 1981).

² (London, 1938) and (New York, 1990), respectively. For a selective bibliography, see Smeed, *Don Juan*, 174–86.

to reach London, but for a Miss Burrell (later Mrs Gould), an English actress who performed the title role in breeches.³

The Olympic, one of London's minor West End theatres, specialised in the popular genres of burlesque, extravaganza, vaudeville and light musical comedy, and *Giovanni in London* was written very much in that vein.⁴ When, some two years after its première, manager Robert William Elliston transferred to the more prestigious Theatre Royal at Drury Lane, he took *Giovanni in London* with him. One of Elliston's most fortunate moves in his early seasons at Drury Lane was to engage the young singer Lucy Elizabeth Vestris, who made her debut in February 1820 as Lilla in a revival of Stephen Storace's *Siege of Belgrade* (1791). Later that season, she played the title role in Thomas Arne's *Artaxerxes* (1762) – a part originally written for the male castrato Peretti – and it was probably her success in this role that persuaded Elliston to take Moncrieff's *Giovanni in London* down from the shelf. It received its Drury Lane première on 30 May 1820, and 'the female Giovanni' was to become Vestris's most famous role, which she later performed at Covent Garden, Manchester, Birmingham and Dublin.⁵

True to its burlesque roots, *Giovanni in London* was relatively fluid: new incidents, dialogues and 'clap-traps' were interpolated by Vestris during performances, enhancing the air of comic spontaneity.⁶ The vocal numbers, interspersed with

³ Burrell seems to have acted *Giovanni* every other night, alternating performances with a Mr McKeon: see, *Songs, Duets, Chorusses, &c., Serious and Comic, sung in the highly popular new broad comic extravaganza entertainment, in two acts, y'clept Giovanni in London; or, the Libertine Reclaimed*, 1st and 2nd edn (London, 1818). Few details have emerged concerning Burrell or McKeon's performances in the original production of *Giovanni in London*. Burrell seems not to have captivated the Olympic's audiences to the extent that Vestris would later do at Drury Lane, perhaps because different cultural meanings were attached to their performances of the role. This complex issue will be explored later in the article.

⁴ For discussion of the 'extravaganza' as a genre, its origins in the ballad operas of John Gay and his contemporaries, and its position in London's theatrical world, see Walter H. Rubsamen, 'The Ballad Burlesques and Extravanzas', *Musical Quarterly*, 36 (1950), 551–61; Andrew Lamb, 'Music of the Popular Theatre', in *Music in Britain: The Romantic Age, 1800–1914*, ed. Nicholas Temperley, Blackwell History of Music in Britain 5 (London, 1988), 92–108.

⁵ Such was Vestris's success in *Giovanni in London* that Moncrieff wrote the three-act extravaganza *Giovanni in Ireland* for her. Premiered on 22 December 1821, it was considered too inflammatory and quickly withdrawn: as James Winston noted in his diary, 'the unpopularity of His Majesty's visit to Ireland was the cause of the opposition, blended with religion and politics', Alfred L. Nelson and Gilbert B. Cross, eds., *Drury Lane Journal: Selections from James Winston's Diaries 1819–1827* (London, 1974), 41–2.

For an exploration of breeches parts written for Vestris later in her career, see Kathy Fletcher, 'Planché, Vestris, and the Transvestite Role: Sexuality and Gender in Victorian Popular Theatre', *Nineteenth-Century Theatre*, 15 (1987), 9–33.

⁶ Vestris adopted a similar procedure in her performances as Macheath in *The Beggar's Opera*, sometimes with disastrous consequences for other members of the cast: see *Memoirs of the Life of Madame Vestris* (London, 1830), 42–4.

Sources for *Giovanni in London* consulted for this paper include: *Songs, Duets, Chorusses, [... in] Giovanni in London* (London, 1818); *Giovanni in London: or, the Libertine Reclaimed: an Operatic Extravaganza in Two Acts by W. T. Moncrieff*, printed in *Cumberland's British Theatre, with Remarks, Biographical and Critical, by D. G. printed from the Acting Copies, as Performed at the Theatres Royal, London, Vol. XVII* (London, 1828), reproduced in Mandel, *The Theatre of Don*

speech, were taken from pre-existing popular ballads, glees, choruses, songs and ensembles: familiar songs were chosen where their associations cast an ironic light on the action, their words subtly altered to fit the new context.⁷ To judge from the published libretti and song-books, only one Mozart number was consistently featured in the production: ‘Away with melancholy’, a version of the slaves’ chorus ‘Das klinget so herrlich’ from *Die Zauberflöte*, here arranged as a glee.⁸ Key events in the drama, however, were probably accompanied by music unspecified in the published texts, for which Mozart may have been a source.

Although Mozart’s music does not figure prominently, the characters of the drama refer directly to his opera, and Leporello obliges those unfamiliar with the events leading up to Giovanni’s descent into hell by recounting them in a ribald song (Act I scene 3).⁹ The curtain rises where Da Ponte’s had fallen – Giovanni is in hell surrounded by taunting, torturing demons. Pluto, ‘King of the Infernal Regions’, exclaims that Giovanni has out-devilled him by seducing the furies and even his consort Prosperine, and protests that his fiery lechery has made hell ‘too hot to hold us’. In revenge ‘on the world which sent him here’, Pluto orders Giovanni to be pitchforked out of hell; stealing Charon’s boat Giovanni escapes across the river Styx ‘to London, dear Emporium of pleasure’. At the Magpie and Punch Bowl public house (Act I scene 3), he is reunited with his former servant. Since we saw him last, Leporello has married Donna Anna, who must have been clutching at straws to save her virtue, having since given birth to Giovanni’s child. Trapped in this humiliating marriage to a feckless, drunken valet, Anna still curses Giovanni (Act I scene 4). He, however, is kept ignorant of Mrs Leporello’s true identity until the denouement of the drama. Giovanni is re-introduced to the village-girl Zerlina, whom Leporello has also brought to London. Now earning a living by selling turnips and greens from a barrow in Covent Garden, she has

continued from previous page

Juan, 398–446; *Songs, Duets, Choruses [...] as performed at the Theatres Royal, Drury Lane, and Covent Garden* (London, n. d.). The following observations are based on Cumberland (1828); significant variants in other published editions have been noted where appropriate.

⁷ For example, a popular lovesong the audience would have known as ‘Together let us range the fields’ became ‘Together let us trapse the streets’ (*sic*). See *Songs, Duets, Choruses, [... in] Giovanni in London* (London, 1818), 13 (Act I); this song is not included in Cumberland’s edition of 1828. Reworking of song texts in this manner was a characteristic feature of the burlesque and extravaganza genres; see Rubsamen, ‘The Ballad Burlesques’.

⁸ ‘Away with fight and quarrel’, sung by a grand chorus at the Magpie and Punch Bowl public house in Act I scene 3. This ensemble, among the first vocal pieces by Mozart to reach England, was available in London before 1800 (see Fig. 3). It achieved a sustained popularity and was reprinted many times in anthologies of popular vocal music. After her arrival in London in 1806, the Italian soprano Angelica Catalani created a fashion for improvising virtuosic variations on this theme, performing her own set (‘O dolce concerto’) at theatres, concerts and music meetings throughout the country.

⁹ The publisher John Miller printed the following address to the public in the first edition of *Songs, Duets, Chorusses, &c. [... in] Giovanni in London* (London, 1818): ‘It has been erroneously imagined by those persons who have not witnessed the performance, that it is “a tale twice told”, and founded on the old worn-out piece of Don Juan; it may therefore be necessary to add, that this Drama begins where the Italian Opera finishes; that the Hero and Leporello are placed in situations entirely *nouvelle*, and that the incidents arising from those situations are completely original. Stratford Place, January 16, 1818’.

THEATRE ROYAL, DRURY LANE.

This Evening, **WEDNESDAY, June 27, 1821,**
His Majesty's Servants will perform the Opera entitled

False Alarms

Sir Damon Gayland, Mr. FOOTE.
Tom Surfeit, Mr. RUSSELL,
Edgar Gayland, Mr. BRAHAM, THEATRE ROYAL, DRURY LANE, LONDON.
In which Character, he will sing, 'The Mil Waltz', 'The Love is warm aschile',
'The Maid of Yarrow' and 'Is there a heart that never lov'd?'
Lieutenant M'Lary, Mr. DOBBS. Gabriel, Mr. HUGHES,
Clod, Mr. KNIGHT,
Grinvelt, Mr. GATTIE, Landlord, Mr. WILLMOTT,
Lady Gayland, Miss WILSON,
Caroline Sedley, Mrs. ORGER,
Emily, Miss CUBITT,
Miss Umbrage, Mrs. HARLOWE,
Susan, Mrs. DOBBS.

After which, the Favourite Musical Extraganza, called

Giovanni in London

Don Giovanni, the Libertine Reclaimed, Madame VESTRIS,
Leporello, his Valet of all Work, Mr. KNIGHT,
Mr. Florentine Finickin, an amorous Haberdasher, Mr. BARNARD,
Mr. Deputy English, an eminent Common-Councilman, Mr. DOBBS,
Pinto, King of the Infernal Regions, Mr. MEREDITH,
Charon, the Ferryman of Styx, Mr. BROMLEY, Fiedrake, a Singing Demon, Mr. READ,
Drainendry, Landlord of the Punchbowl and Maggie, Mr. WILLMOTT,
Porcus, a flourishing Coachmaker, Mr. W. H. WILLIAMS,
Shirk, Mr. HUGHES, Squares, Mr. STARMER, Snaps, Mr. RANDALL,
Simpkins, an eminent Tailor, Mr. MAXWELL, Popinjay, Foreman to Finickin, Mr. VINING.
Prusepine, Queen of the Infernal Regions, Miss COOPER,
Mrs. Leporello, Wife to Leporello, late Duenna Anna, Mrs. ORGER,
Miss Constantia Quixotte, a young Lady of Fortune and romantic ideas, Miss CUBITT,
Mrs. English, the Deputy's young Wife, Mrs. MAXWELL,
Mrs. Drainendry, } Rescued Souls, } Mrs. DOBBS, }
Mrs. Porcus, } } Miss PHILLIPS, }
Mrs. Simpkins, } } Mrs. MARGERUM, }
Squalling Fan, Cleverant Bride, } Mrs. GLAND, }
A PAS SEUL by Miss TREE.

In the course of the Piece, the following Scenery:

Tartarus	Marinari	Chalk Farm, with Primrose Hill	Dixon
The River Styx, with Pluto's Palace	Dido	Sir John English's Home	Andrews
The Punchbowl and Maggie Public House	Andrews	St. James's Park	Marinari
External of Leporello's House and Fanny's	Ditto	Interior of the King's Bench	Dixon
Lodging	Ditto	Charing Cross	Andrews
Masquade al Fresco	Ditto		

Books of the SONGS, to be had in the Theatre. Price 4s 6d.

The Doors will be opened at Half-past Six o'Clock,
and the Performances on each Evening commence at Seven.

Boxes 7s. Second Price 3s. 6d.—Pit 3s. 6d. Second Price 2s.
Lower Gallery 2s. Second Price 1s.—Upper Gallery 1s. Second Price 6d.

Places to be taken of Mr. ROWELL, in the Rooms of the Saloon of the Theatre.
PRIVATE BOXES can only be obtained for the Evening, of Mr. ROWELL, at the Box Office.

No Music to be returned. Tabby, Printed, Theatre Royal, Drury Lane

Tomorrow, **ARTAXERXES.** The MAYOR of GARRATT. And **HERESE.**
On Friday, The LORD of the MANOR. With The BLIND BOY. And other Entertainments.
For the Benefit of Madame VESTRIS.
On Saturday, **PIRCE** A NEW FARCE. And **GIOVANNI** in LONDON.

Fig. 1 Drury Lane playbill. Mander & Mitchenson Theatre Collection (copyright).

remained faithful to Giovanni, but to no avail – her trade has destroyed her looks, and shouting out her wares all day has earned her the name ‘Squalling Fanny’. Anna has been socially degraded and Zerlina physically ruined by steps they took to survive the aftermath of Giovanni’s attentions and desertion. Leporello is also a

victim, since he mistakenly regards himself as the father of Anna's child: in the 1818 version, he sings a ballad in which he cherishes the resemblance between the child's features and his own, in transports of paternal pride.¹⁰

Giovanni is growing bored already and asks Leporello where entertainment may be had in the city. Leporello informs him that Sir John English is giving a grand masquerade, and in a satirical song advises Giovanni how to pass as a gentleman 'beau' in London society:

Song – Leporello

Air – 'Quite Politely' [Act I scene 4]

If in London town you'd live,
Quite politely, quite politely,
Let me, sir, this lesson give,
And be, complete, a beau, sir, –
Cossacks you like sacks must wear, 5
In a brutus cock your hair,
And wear of wellingtons a pair,
To shine from top to toe, sir! Tol de rol, &c.

You must get a pair of stays,
Like the ladies, like the ladies, 10
Through an eyeglass still must gaze
And stare at all you meet, sir!
With sham collar hide your nose,
Wear false calves like other Beaux,
And still a brazen front disclose, 15
With brass heels on your feet, sir. Tol de rol, &c.

To the Opera you must go,
Don Giovanni, Don Giovanni,
And talk as fashionables do,
Mostly loudly while they're singing; 20
You must go to ball and play,
Drink, game, swear, and lie all day,
Protect some graceless *chère amie*,
Yourself to ruin bringing. Tol de rol, &c.

You must visit, race, and fight, 25
Betting on, sir, two to one, sir;
Four-in-hand to drive delight,
Like groom and jockey clever.
With your tailor debts contract,
In the Bench for three months pack'd, 30
Get out by the white-washing act,
And be as clean as ever. Tol de rol, &c.¹¹

¹⁰ 'Behold! in his sweet expressive face', in *Songs, Duets, Chorusses, &c. [in ...] Giovanni in London* (London, 1818), 10; 2nd edn, 14.

¹¹ Line 5: cossacks were a type of full boot, or perhaps (more likely in this context) a cape; a sack was a loose type of gown worn by women, or a silk train attached to the shoulders of such a dress. 6: a brutus was a type of wig made fashionable by George IV. 7: a style of leather boot named after Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington. 9: stays were



Fig. 2 (a) Portrait of Madame Vestris engraved by Baird of Belfast, c. 1820. Mander & Mitchenson Theatre Collection (copyright).

continued from previous page

waistline-enhancing corsets, worn by men as well as women. 11: a monocle. 16: spurs. 27: driving a coach and four horses. 30: imprisoned for debt by the Court of King's Bench. 31: a common nickname for The Insolvency Act.



Fig. 2 (b) Vestris as Don Giovanni at Drury Lane, 30 May 1820. Enthoven Theatre Collection, Victoria & Albert Museum (copyright).

Missa: Luavine.
1

AWAY WITH MELANCHOLY

FAVORITE
AIR OR DUET.

Composed by
M. Mozart.

Pr. 1^s

LONDON.

Printed by Longman, Clementi & Co. 26 Cheapside.

Piano Forte *Andante*

A - way with me - lan - cho - ly, Nor doleful changes
A - way with me - lan - cho - ly, Nor doleful changes

Fig. 3 A version of 'Das klinget so herrlich' from *Die Zauberflöte* circulating in England before 1800, and sung as a glee in Moncrieff's *Giovanni in London* (Author's private collection).

The joke is enhanced by the fact that Leporello is addressing a cross-dressed woman, and much play is made of items of female clothing, such as stays or corsets, that fashionable men also adopted in their pursuit of sartorial elegance. Leporello literally tutors Vestris as the Don in her new, crossed gender – a gender defined by dress, pastimes (drinking, gaming, betting at the races) and etiquette (talking at the opera, and taking a lover). In other words, the song emphasises gender as performance, something artificial that had to be conditioned, constructed and learnt, rather than being determined simply by biological sex.

At the opening of the next scene, we are transported to the masquerade ball hosted by Sir John English, where the playwright Moncrieff re-enacts the seduction of Zerlina as presented by Mozart and Da Ponte. The heroine is the oxymoronic-named Constantia Quixotte, a rich heiress with ‘romantic ideas’, and the ward of Sir John. Constantia is being courted by Finikin, ‘an amorous haberdasher’, whom she scorns as ‘a namby-pamby thing’ incapable of pleasing her. Giovanni is much more her type: he begins to woo her, and they sing a love duet that echoes ‘La ci darem la mano’ – ‘In the waltz our forms we’ll twine, / Thine to mine, and mine to thine’, sung to the melody of ‘Voulez-vous danser’. Finikin watches helplessly as Giovanni steals her away. The happy couple prepare to elope to Gretna Green and consummate their love, but are intercepted before they can leave.

As his profession and surname suggest, Finikin is presented as an insipid fop, a satire of the fashionable dandy, but Moncrieff may also have been alluding to what amounted to a third gender in London society at the time – that of the ‘molly’ or effeminate homosexual. Research into the relationship between dandyism and male homosexuality is still in its infancy, but Randolph Trumbach has shown that a homosexual subculture centring on particular public houses known as ‘molly houses’ was well established in London by 1750.¹² Connections between London’s molly houses and its theatrical world were observed to be close in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, aggravating a traditional anxiety that the theatre was a feminising influence on society.¹³ The recurrence of the character-type epitomised by Finikin in stage works of this period can perhaps therefore be interpreted as a form of self-defence: characters who seemed to ridicule the molly distanced the theatre from that subculture. The fact that many Englishmen regarded sexual libertinism in the form of male homosexuality as stemming from Italy may also be reflected in the first name Moncrieff chose for his fop, ‘Florentine’.¹⁴

¹² Randolph Trumbach, ‘The Birth of the Queen: Sodomy and the Emergence of Gender Equality in Modern Culture, 1660–1750’, in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey, Jr. (Harmondsworth, 1991), 129–40. See also Gary C. Thomas, ‘“Was George Frideric Handel Gay?”: On Closet Questions and Cultural Politics’, in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood and Gary C. Thomas (New York, 1994), 155–204.

¹³ See Laurence Senelick, ‘Mollies or Men of Mode? Sodomy and the Eighteenth-Century London Stage’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 1 (1990), 33–67. On the intimate relations between theatre, tragedy and the feminine, see Froma I. Zeitlin, ‘Playing the Other: Theatre, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama’, *Representations*, 2 (Summer 1985), 63–94.

¹⁴ Senelick’s comments are revealing here: ‘In its evolving gentility, the theatre could validate its credentials for social utility by attacking only those abuses that might be mentioned in mixed company. Sodomy per se could not be pilloried without the stage being accused of obscenity; but it might be obliquely attacked through satire of effeminate behaviour, which was increasingly identified with male-to-male sexuality. The identification of effeminacy with sodomy became an admissible dramatic code’, ‘Mollies or Men of Mode?’, 43.

For a survey of British writers who traced male homosexuality to Italy, see Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London, 1988), 19–21 and 75; and Louis Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love* (London, 1985), 52–6. Further research into the homosexual argot in use at this time would be invaluable in decoding much of the innuendo in popular stage works such as *Giovanni in London*.

Having lost face at the ball, Finikin attempts to recover his dignity by challenging Giovanni to a duel on Primrose Hill. Act II begins there the following morning. Giovanni and Leporello are the first to arrive: even though he has lost the girl, Giovanni resigns himself to the duel, regarding it as an occupational hazard. Finikin arrives with his second, Popinjay, and both are presented as cowardly in the extreme: Finikin has sent for the Bow Street runners in the hope they will arrive before any shots are fired; Popinjay is afraid he will swoon with terror, and demands smelling salts. Despite the mortal danger his friend is in, he remarks, 'you like perfumes; which are you most partial to?', to which Finikin replies, 'Lavender', – probably a reference to the traditional use of this scent in washing and healing wounds, although one cannot exclude the fact that by the end of the nineteenth century a penchant for lavender had become a signal for homosexual tastes.

The duel is the supreme 'macho' ritual, a male privilege in which the principals seek to out-male each other in a fight for dominance: in this case, the prize is the rich and beautiful Constantia. How symbolic, therefore, that when Giovanni and Finikin summon up their masculinity and shoot, the bullets discharged from their pistols turn out to be blanks, and Finikin, terrified, concedes victory to his rival. Finikin the fop and Giovanni the cross-dressed woman lack male authority and are ultimately impotent. Had Giovanni been played by a man, the ridicule of Finikin the fop would have been powerful enough, but it is doubly so when it is a cross-dressed woman who thus unmans him.¹⁵

In the latter scenes of the piece, Giovanni is the object of intrigues by Sir John English, his wife, and his ward Constantia, all of whom seek to trap him into marrying Constantia, on the grounds that 'a reformed rake always makes a good husband' (Act II scene 2). This is not before Giovanni has succeeded in seducing Mrs English, however. The conspirators devise a trumped-up law-suit, 'English v. Giovanni', which ends with the Don serving a spell in debtor's prison (a necessary rite of passage for any English 'beau', according to Leporello's song). Spunge, his suitably-named fellow inmate, orientates Giovanni in his new surroundings, which turn out to be something of a paradise: drink is on tap and the prisoners 'feed like princes'. Spunge tells him that 'the best of company: all the great wits and authors are here. We have some players, too, of no mean note [and] as for gentlemen we're full of them' (Act II scene 4). There are no women, however; and Giovanni declines Spunge's offer to find him a 'chum' or bed-fellow amongst the inmates.

Released from prison, Giovanni vows to make up for his temperance (Act II scene 5). 'Ranging everywhere in searching of petticoats', he passes Charing Cross

¹⁵ Audiences may have drawn a parallel between this mock duel and that portrayed by Maria Edgeworth in her novel of 1801, *Belinda*, the fourth edition of which was published in London in 1821. Edgeworth subverts this ritual even further, presenting a metaphorical warning to women who aspire to male privilege: Lady Delacour is bullied by her friend Harriot Freke, the cross-dressed and mannish lesbian, into challenging another woman to a duel, for which Lady Delacour dons the breeches. When this 'unnatural' duel is broken up by an outraged mob, Delacour fires her pistol into the air, bruising her breast; an abscess develops, which she fears is cancer. For further discussion of Edgeworth's novel and its manipulation of gender codes, see Emma Donoghue, *Passions Between Women: British Lesbian Culture, 1668–1801* (London, 1993), 100–103.

in the moonlight, and is spooked by the equestrian statue of King Charles I, who by virtue of some deft ventriloquism by Leporello tells him to 'leave the girls alone' (Act II scene 6). Giovanni wonders 'How the devil has this fellow found his way from Spain?', and, discouraged by the memory of his sojourn in hell, decides to switch from raking to praying. He agrees to Leporello's suggestion that he should marry, ultimately settling on Constantia after a few further twists and turns of the plot. Sir John English gives him Constantia's hand in marriage, and Giovanni realises that by swearing eternal constancy and love he finds 'a milder path to reform' than those he had previously been forced along, and one that will in fact lead him to heaven. The closing chorus asks us to forgive the reformed Don Giovanni his misspent past, which he now leaves behind him.

How convincing is this Faustian touch, whereby the arch-philanderer Don Giovanni achieves heavenly redemption by embracing true love and marriage? Both contrived and implausible, it conveys a clear moral message: rakes must be tamed, libertines must be reclaimed, and the laws society constructs to contain and control sexuality must triumph for the good of all. The domestication of Don Giovanni the Spanish/Italian libertine is ultimately brought about by Sir John English, patriarchal upholder of the law, the status quo, and John Bull personification of Englishness and English morality.¹⁶ It can be no coincidence that *Sir John* is the English translation of *Don Giovanni*, since Moncrieff has consistently set English up as Giovanni's foil in terms of his outlook on life, sexuality and mores, by this means marginalising sexual libertinism as 'foreign', or non-English.¹⁷

Such may be the message with regard to libertinism, but why choose a cross-dressed actress for this role, and how does such gender-bending on the pre-Victorian musical stage reflect attitudes towards gender and sexuality in London society at this time? As we have already seen, a cross-dressed Giovanni heightens the irony, but other issues may also be at stake here.¹⁸ First, there is the age-old

¹⁶ Sir John English is described by Moncrieff as a deputy Common Councillor in the City of London, and sings the patriotic ballad, 'Oh the Roast Beef of Old England', in the opening scene of Act II.

¹⁷ In keeping with the genre of the piece, Moncrieff also uses English's John Bullishness to jibe satirically at the Englishman's expensive infatuation with exotic Italian opera: '*Deputy*: Why, wife! Do you know this is the famous Giovanni? And, from what I have heard a foreigner and a singer. So sir, like a true John Bull, I am glad to see you; and, though I may not understand you, sir, I like you; and any service I can render you, you may freely command' (Act II scene 1).

¹⁸ Recent literature addressing the function of the cross-dressed woman in opera includes: *En Travesti: Women, Gender, Subversion, Opera*, ed. Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith (New York, 1995). For discussion of related phenomena, see also Laurence Senelick, 'The Evolution of the Male Impersonator on the Nineteenth-Century Popular Stage', *Essays in Theatre*, 1 (1982), 30–44; Elaine Aston, 'Male Impersonation in the Music Hall: The Case of Vesta Tilley', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 4 (1988), 247–57; and Lynne Garafola, 'The Travesty Dancer in Nineteenth-Century Ballet', in *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-dressing*, ed. Lesley Ferris (London, 1993), 96–106.

It may be tempting to locate Vestris's personification of the Don within the nineteenth-century pantomime tradition of the principal boy, in which a cross-dressed actress plays the juvenile male lead. But as David Mayer has pointed out, attempts to bring

motivation that male costumes revealed more leg than standard female dress. An actress with a well-proportioned figure, dressed as a man, titillated the audience, heightened a character's sexual appeal and swelled the coffers of the theatre. Kenrick noted in the *British Stage* (January 1821) that:

the bait succeeded; the town ran in crowds to see Madame Vestris's legs, though they had been somewhat lukewarm about her singing; and hundreds who 'made mouths at her' while attired in the becoming dress of her own sex, discovered that her proportions were most captivating when set off to advantage by a tight pair of elastic pantaloons (3).¹⁹

During Vestris's performances as the Don, one enterprising individual set up a stall selling plaster cast models of *La Jambe de Vestris*, which for a time no fashionable mantlepiece could be without.²⁰ An anonymous risqué ballad on this theme was circulated (see Fig. 4). This doubtless reflects the commodification of the female body on the commercial stage, which had altered the role of women in the theatre during the eighteenth century, merging the traditional notion that actresses only ever played themselves on the stage with a growing desire to promote and celebrate the actress's personality.²¹

The title-pages of spurious biographies published from 1826 clearly show the extent to which Vestris's identity had fused with that of Don Giovanni in the public mind, suggesting that audiences read the singer's real-life persona into her performances.²² As one of her anonymous memoirists wrote, 'Madame Vestris is off the stage the same as she is on – the same vivacious fascinating being – the same arch expression – the same easy manners'.²³ Since separating from her husband Armand Vestris, the French dancer and choreographer, shortly after marrying him at the age of sixteen, Lucy had regarded herself as a single woman. Gossip, rumour and amorous intrigue followed her wherever she went, and her name was linked to some of the most powerful men in the country, including George IV, politicians,

continued from previous page

the breeches role into pantomime in 1815 and 1819 were rejected. The principal boy did not become a stock character in British pantomime until the 1830s. See David Mayer, 'The Sexuality of Pantomime', *Theatre Quarterly*, 4 (1974), 55–66.

¹⁹ At least one of the costumes worn by Vestris in *Giovanni in London* appears to have been closely modelled on that worn by Italian baritone Giuseppe Ambrogetti as Giovanni in the London première of Mozart and Da Ponte's opera (King's Theatre, 12 April 1817). For discussion of costumes worn by Victorian transvestite actresses in the extravaganza, see Fletcher, 'Planché, Vestris, and the Transvestite Role', 26–9.


²⁰ Thomas H. Duncombe, *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Slingsby Duncombe*, 2 vols. (London, 1868), I, 175.

²¹ See Lesley Ferris, *Acting Women: Images of Women in Theatre* (London, 1990), 149.

²² For example: [John Duncombe], *Memoirs of the Life, Public and Private Adventures of Madame Vestris; [...] with Interesting and Curious Anecdotes of Celebrated and Distinguished Characters in the Fashionable World. Detailing an interesting variety of singularly Curious and Amusing Scenes, as performed both before & behind the Curtain, both in Public and Private Life, 'At Home' and Abroad* (London, [1826]); and [William Chubb], *Memoirs of the Private and Public Life, Adventures and Wonderful Exploits of Madame Vestris, the Female Giovanni, Macheath, and Don Juan of the present day* (London, c. 1830).

For an account of the legal action Vestris instigated against John Duncombe in the Court of King's Bench to stop his publication of these anonymous memoirs, see William W. Appleton, *Madame Vestris and the London Stage* (New York, 1974), 42–3.

²³ *Memoirs of the Life of Madame Vestris* (London, 1830), 59.



Madam Vestris's Legs.

Text—"Betsy Baker."

Marlborough-Street Office, Thursday:

HAVE you heard about this piece of work
 All over London town, sir?
 It is all about an actress,
 A Lady of renown, sir:
 The case was heard at Marlborough-street,
 The truth I will tell you now, sir,
 A man had stole the Lady's legs,
 Which caused a pretty row, sir.

CHORUS.

Some villian stole my Lady's legs,
 We hope he will get justice,
 Handsome just above the knee,
 The legs of Madam Vestris.

Mr. Papara, a gentleman,
 Of merit was, O fags, sir,
 Went unto the Magistrate,
 About a pair of legs, sir;
 He says, kind sir, the legs were mine,
 And now I do want justice,
 They were modelled from a Lady's legs,
 Whose name is Madam Vestris.

Then sir, says the laughing Magistrate,
 I now must ask you, whether
 The legs of Madam Vestris,
 Could not be kept together.
 I swear the handsome legs were mine,
 And hope you'll give the thief a dose.

For it was not in my power,
 To keep the legs together close.

I am the man that made the legs,
 The model, sir, you now may see,
 I made them like my Lady's own,
 Exactly just above the knee:
 And your worship must commit the man,
 And I must ask you, whether
 'Twas possible that I could keep,
 Such handsome legs together.

Oh! then says the worthy Magistrate,
 This case I plainly see, sir,
 The Legs of Madam Vestris,
 Are yours above the knee, sir;
 And I shall send the thief to jail,
 In spite of wind and weather,
 When the trial does come on,
 Bring my Lady's legs together.

Now when the trial does come on,
 It's true what I report, sir,
 You will laugh to see my Lady's legs
 Come hopping into court, sir.
 If the thief did steal my Lady's legs,
 I hope he will get justice,
 Was it possible that it could be,
 The legs of Madam Vestris?

Printed by T. BIRT, No. 10, Great St. Andrew-Street, Seven Dial:

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Fig. 4 Anonymous ballad printed by T. Birt, c. 1820. Theatre Museum Covent Garden (copyright).

actors, aristocrats and notable libertines. She cloaked her affairs in secrecy, was blackmailed at least once, and showered with jewels and money by her lovers and protectors (see Fig. 5). Like Giovanni, she was partly Italian in origin, born Lucia Elizabeth Bartolozzi, the granddaughter of the famous engraver Francesco Bartolozzi, and for many of her admirers this added to her allure. Thought to be one of the most beautiful and charismatic women in the kingdom, she was also

powerful, assertive and independent, and invaded a traditional male preserve by becoming a successful theatre manager later in her career.²⁴ In many ways, then, Vestris was seen to represent the female libertine, both in her public and private life. As the cross-dressed Don Giovanni in Moncrieff's drama however, she enacted the same process of domestication she defiantly resisted in real life – an irony that perhaps would not have been lost on her audiences.

Vestris as the female Don Giovanni must therefore have presented a dilemma for her male audience. Reading her stage persona as that of a woman, and a notable female libertine, whilst watching her in male-clothing make love to a succession of women, may have suggested an aspect of sexuality that strayed beyond the bounds of legitimate desire and marriage. And yet, if men in the audience accepted Vestris's illusion at face value, or rather costume value, they found themselves admiring the legs of a male-dressed, male-gendered character. The *Theatrical Inquisitor* seems to express something of this alarm, feeling a need to corral Vestris's ambiguous sexuality into normative categories and harmless game-playing:

We are the more pleased, the less she adheres to her character, and the more she develops herself. [...] Our heroine's assumption of the other sex has exactly the same effect upon us, that a mistress's dressing in boy's clothes, and gamboling in a drawing-room would have. We admire the symmetry of her figure, and the apparent ease with which she falls into habits with which we presume her to be unfamiliar. We say, 'What a pretty fellow she looks!' but we do not, for an instant, think that we could mistake her for a man; and, if we did so, we should be as instantaneously disgusted, and all the pleasurable portion of the frolic would be at an end.²⁵

Alternatively, Vestris's masquerade in the male gaze could have facilitated a flirtation with the notion of bisexual libertinism, that nevertheless remained firmly and safely rooted in heterosexuality.

Indeed, contemporary accounts suggest that during Vestris's performances audiences experienced what Lesley Ferris describes as 'moments of liminality', points at which accepted gender thresholds became blurred and unfocused, giving a sense of shape-shifting and their own double vision.²⁶ This yielded several readings of her persona based on the interplay of possible genderings, as illustrated in this anonymous ballad on Madame Vestris in breeches:

²⁴ Several biographies of Lucia Vestris have been published to date, including: Charles Pearce, *Madame Vestris and her Times* (London, 1923); Clifford John Williams, *Madame Vestris: A Theatrical Biography* (London, 1973); Appleton, *Madame Vestris* (n. 22). See also, Joseph Knight, 'Mathews, Lucia Elizabeth', in *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Sidney Lee (London, 1894), XXXVIII, 41–3.

In 1831 Vestris reopened the Olympic Theatre in partnership with Maria Foote (who withdrew shortly afterwards), thus becoming the first female lessee the London stage had known, according to a prologue by John Hamilton Reynolds delivered on the occasion. Vestris controlled the Olympic Theatre until 1838, and with her second husband Charles Mathews she managed Covent Garden theatre (1839–42), and the Lyceum (1847–55).

²⁵ *Theatrical Inquisitor*, quoted by William Oxberry, *Oxberry's Dramatic Biography and Histronic Anecdotes* (London, 1826), V, 91–106, here 104.

²⁶ Lesley Ferris, 'Introductions: Current Crossings', in *Crossing the Stage*, 1–19, here 11.

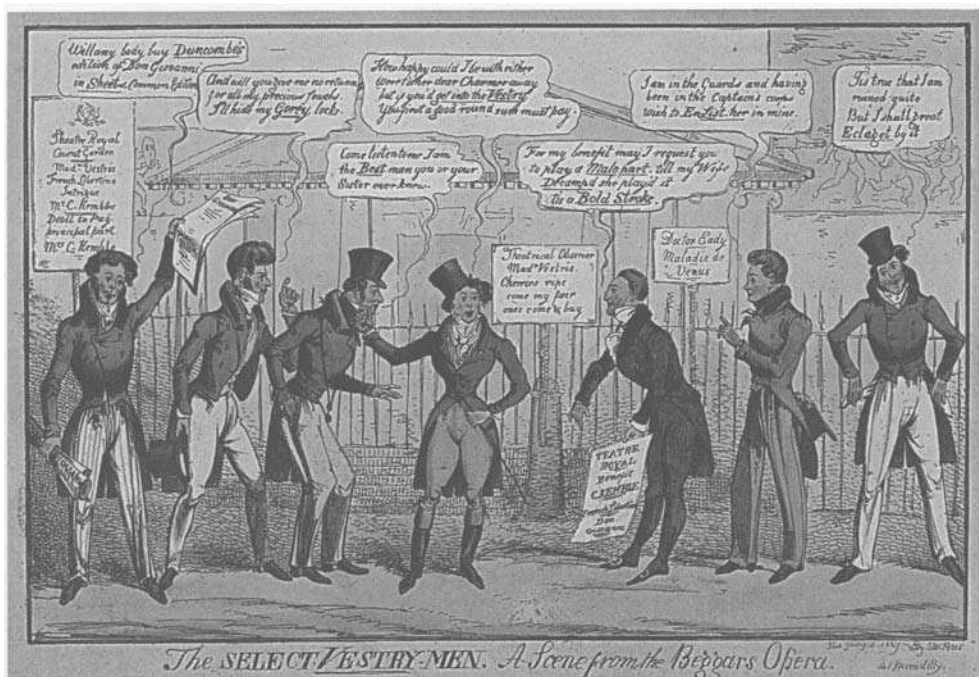


Fig. 5 Satirical cartoon, published 8 January 1827 by S. W. Fores, showing Vestris in another of her breeches roles – that of Macheath in John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*. Most of the ‘Vestry men’ depicted here belonged to a coterie of ‘young bucks’, who either had or sought attachments to Vestris at various points in her career (Kemble and Elliston are the exceptions). From left to right, they are: Thomas W. Duncombe, MP for Finsbury, who assisted her financially on several occasions; Montagu Gore, who in 1822–3 offered a settlement of £500 per year in return for her exclusive favours, and sent her diamond jewellery (Vestris balked at a clause in their agreement which read ‘as long as she is faithful’, and broke off their connection); Captain Best, a long-standing protector of Vestris and her sister Josephine, who seems to have paid for their singing and dancing lessons; Charles Kemble, manager of Covent Garden Theatre, then in financial difficulties; possibly Elliston; the rakish Horatio Clagitt, with whom Vestris was living during her clandestine negotiations with Gore. Theatre Museum Covent Garden (copyright).

What a breast – what an eye! what a foot, leg, and thigh!
 What wonderful things she has shown us;
 Round hips, swelling sides, and masculine strides –
 Proclaim her an English Adonis!

In Macheath how she leers, and unprincipled appears,
 And tips off the bumpers so jolly;
 And then, oh! so blest, on two bosoms to rest,
 And change from a Lucy to Polly.

Her very air and style would corrupt with a smile –
 Let a virgin resist if she can;
 Her ambrosial kisses seem heavenly blisses –
 What a pity she is not a man.

Then in Don Giovanni, she puts life into many,
 And delights with her glees and her catches;
 Her best friend, at will, she can gracefully kill,
 And the wife of his bosom debauches.

The profligate youth she depicts with such truth,
 All admire the villain and liar;
 In bed-chamber scenes, where you see through the screens,
 No rake on the town can come nigh her.

Her example so gay, leads the young all astray,
 And the old lick their lips as they grin;
 And think, 'if she would,' why, mayhap, they 'still could'
 Have the pleasure and power still to sin.

How alarming is beauty when ankle and shoe-tie
 Peep out like a bird from the nest;
 They are like heralds of delight, and morn, noon, and night
 Fond Fancy can point out the rest,

Then be breeches on the go, give me the 'fur-below'
 Which appears with such grace upon many;
 But Vestris to please, must her lovely limbs squeeze
 Into the pantaloons of Don Giovanni.²⁷

Speaking of Vestris's travesty portrayal of another libertine role – Macheath in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* – one memoirist writes: 'the beautiful proportion of her limbs, the manly nonchalance of her manner, and the arch manner in which she played and gave the songs, made the audience forget she was a woman'.²⁸ Yet he goes on to complain that viewing her female body in breeches left nothing to the imagination, and that 'the light costume of flesh-coloured pantaloons' donned by Vestris was a 'breach of female modesty' (63). Thus, whilst he was clearly *not* amongst those able to forget Vestris was a woman, the description of her nonchalant manner is male gendered. Elsewhere, the memoirist gives a more detailed description of Vestris's stage manner in a vignette of her disagreement with a fellow actor who missed his cue during a performance of *Giovanni in London*: here

²⁷ Quoted in *Memoirs of the Life of Madame Vestris* (London, 1830), 62–3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

we sense her relishing the swashbuckling freedom of the breeches role, ‘carelessly tapping her boots with her cane, she swaggered up the stage, and seating herself on the table, sat for some time swinging her crossed leg to-and-fro’ (43).

William Hazlitt was among those who held fast to the dictates of dramatic realism, arguing that Vestris was too feminine to be convincing in the role of Giovanni.²⁹ Others enjoyed her gender play, interpreting her act of cross-dressing as the attainment of an androgynous, de-feminised state within which she merely put on the garb of the man, complimenting her on the ‘facility with which she could unsex herself, and the confident boldness with which she made her bow to the audience, in breeches’.³⁰ The illusion of androgyny was no doubt enhanced by her low vocal range – that of a contralto, unusual for the early nineteenth-century London stage. Curiously, the anonymous memoirist quoted above refers to it as ‘a sweet tenor’ (67). Underlining the erotic power of that voice, he notes that ‘her appearance steals away the understanding before she opens her seductive lips, and enchants you with heavenly sounds’ (68). One critic complains, however, that as Macheath, Vestris ‘diminishes into a smart boy, and the voice of the brave man is lost in the half-womanish notes of the stripling’.³¹ Perhaps this accounts for her success in another Mozartian pair of breeches, those of the amorous adolescent Cherubino in *The Marriage of Figaro*, at Covent Garden in 1842.³²

To do justice to the scope and complexity of Vestris’s regendering of the libertine and its reception in late Georgian London, it is helpful to consider possible subcultural readings of her stage persona. Trumbach has argued persuasively that by 1800 there were not two, but four genders in English society, two legitimate, and two stigmatised: a lesbian identity was emerging for women, which paralleled that of the molly for men, and comprised a fourth gender, denoted the ‘tommy’ or ‘sapphist’.³³ Although this gender paradigm probably did not establish itself in the wider public consciousness until later in the century, London’s theatrical world in the 1820s was certainly familiar with such a role for women.

²⁹ P. P. Howe, ed., *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 21 vols. (London, 1930–4), XVIII, 352.

³⁰ Unidentified newspaper clipping in Madame Vestris file, Harvard Theater Collection, quoted in Laurence Senelick, ‘Boys and Girls Together: Subcultural Origins of Glamour Drag and Male Impersonation on the Nineteenth-Century Stage’, in Ferris, *Crossing the Stage*, 80–95, here 81.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² This production was a new English version by J. R. Planché premièred on 15 April 1842, conducted by Julius Benedict. It remained close to the original, and replaced an earlier English version – Holcroft’s adaptation, based on his *Follies of the Day* (1784) copied from Beaumarchais, with Mozart’s score ‘adapted’ by Henry Bishop and several numbers replaced with new songs: see Tim Carter, *W. A. Mozart: ‘Le nozze di Figaro’*, Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge, 1987), 133–5. At this point in her career, Vestris was manager of Covent Garden theatre under the proprietorship of Charles Kemble.

³³ Randolph Trumbach, ‘London’s Sapphists: From Three Sexes to Four Genders in the Making of Modern Culture’, in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York, 1991), 112–41. For the etymology of these and other terms for same-sex desire between women, see Emma Donoghue, *Passions Between Women*, 2–8.

Charlotte Charke, the flamboyant actress daughter of Colly Cibber, recounted in her autobiography of 1755 how she had carried her stage-transvestism into real life, courting several marriageable women whilst dressed as a man. She travelled the country for a time, living and working with another female actress, passing as ‘Mr Brown’ to her ‘Mrs Brown’. The question of whether Charke exceeded the bounds of romantic friendship with her partners, perhaps not surprisingly, remains ambiguous in her memoirs, although a close reading of the text uncovers hints at same-sex desire.³⁴

The diaries of Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi are a valuable source for reconstructing late eighteenth-century attitudes towards the ‘sapphist’, whose relationships Piozzi evidently distinguished from her own romantic friendship with the tragedian Sarah Siddons. She cast a sapphic light on the aristocratic sculptress Anne Seymour Damer and the comic actress Elizabeth Farren, lover and future wife of Lord Derby; Damer often acted with Farren in the private theatrical entertainments of friends.³⁵ ‘Tis a Joke in London now to say such a one visits *Mrs Damer*’ noted Piozzi, and Joseph Farrington, writing in 1798, linked suspicions about Damer’s private life with her habitual partial cross-dressing: ‘The singularities of Mrs Damer are remarkable – She wears a Man’s Hat, and Shoes, – and a Jacket also like a mans – thus she walks abt. the fields with a hooking stick’.³⁶

Mrs Piozzi’s circle also included Lady Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, two Irish gentlewomen who eloped together in 1778, lived in a Welsh cottage for over fifty years, and were lionised as the literary ‘Ladies of Llangollen’. They presented their partnership as virtuous, respectable and by no means overtly sexual, yet they were not immune to sapphic interpretations of their relationship: when *The General Evening Post* (24 July 1790) printed the following passage, associating their ‘extraordinary female affection’ with transvestism on the part of Butler, they sought advice from friends on prosecuting the author:³⁷

³⁴ Leonard Ashley, ed., *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke*, 2nd edn (London: 1755; rpt. Gainesville, Fla., 1969).

For a discussion of Charke’s text, see Kristina Straub, ‘The Guilty Pleasures of Female Theatrical Cross-Dressing and the Autobiography of Charlotte Charke’, in *Body Guards*, 142–66; and Donoghue, *Passions*, 97–100, 164–6.

³⁵ Katherine C. Balderston, ed., *Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs Hester Lynch Thrale (Later Mrs. Piozzi), 1776–1809*, 2 vols., 2nd edn (Oxford, 1951), 770. See also the anonymous pamphlet, *A Sapphick Epistle, from Jack Cavendish, to the Honourable and most Beautiful Mrs. D – R.* (London, [1782]). For discussion of Damer’s life, see Percy Noble, *Anne Seymour Damer: A Woman of Art and Fashion, 1748–1828* (London, 1908); Brian Fothergill, *The Strawberry Hill Set: Horace Walpole and his Circle* (London, 1983), 201–2; and Donoghue, *Passions*, 145–8, 262–5.

³⁶ James Grieg, ed., *The Farrington Diary*, 8 vols. (London, n. d.), I, 233–4.

³⁷ Liz Stanley, ‘Epistemological Issues in Researching Lesbian History: The Case of Romantic Friendship’, in *Working Out: New Directions for Women’s Studies*, ed. H. Hinds, A. Phoenix and J. Stacey (London, 1992), 161–72, here 163; Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York, 1993), 92–106; Elizabeth Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study in Romantic Friendship* (Harmondsworth, 1971), 73–7; Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York, 1981), 120–5.

Extraordinary Female Affection: [. . .] Miss Butler is tall and masculine, she wears always a riding habit, hangs her hat with the air of a sportsman in the hall, and appears in all respects as a young man, if we except the petticoats which she still retains. Miss Ponsonby on the contrary, is polite and effeminate, fair and beautiful.

As these examples show, London's theatrical and artistic world clearly had a category in which to place such women, and women could be ostracised on suspicion of sapphic tendencies, particularly if they were also observed to cross-dress in some degree.³⁸

Lucy Vestris, like Charlotte Charke, wore full rather than half male dress on stage, and in this respect may have been less closely aligned with the 'tommy' or 'sapphist' than with that scourge of patriarchy, the 'female husband' – women who not only cross-dressed but also cross-gendered. Choosing to live and dress as men in real life by assuming male identities, mannerisms and behaviour, such 'passing women' were thus able to make a living, travel about safely in all-male environments, or in some instances to conduct illicit affairs with married men. Charke was a 'part-time' passing woman, but some married other women and lived their entire adult lives as men – their biological sex being discovered only after death, when it was usually written-up with fascination in the newspapers.³⁹ Passing women were viewed as more of a threat to patriarchal society than 'sapphists', because such women usurped male privilege in all aspects of their lives, exposing gender as mere social construction. The anxieties and confusion surrounding 'passing women' are evident in Henry Fielding's pamphlet *The Female Husband* (1746) – a fantastical elaboration of the case of Mary Hamilton – and during Vestris's lifetime such women risked persecution and prosecution if their true identity was revealed.⁴⁰

The emergence of a stigmatised sapphic gender for women, and the perceived threat to society from women passing as men, combined to increase hostility towards female transvestism. This seems to have carried with it some degree of risk

³⁸ Terry Castle has observed that the mythic figure of the transgressive male rake, of the man ruled by his desire for women, offered for some nineteenth-century women 'a way "into" their own transgressive desire: the one kind of sexual unorthodoxy sanctioned the other' – hence, Anne Lister was interested to discover that Miss Ponsonby (of the Ladies of Llangollen) had confessed to reading the first canto of Byron's *Don Juan* (*The Apparitional Lesbian*, 92–106, here 104). In the light of Castle's comments, it is perhaps significant that the high-minded Ladies also owned a china model of *La Jambe de Vestris* (Mavor, 212), although they left no record of having attended any of her performances.

³⁹ For example, the case of 'James Allen', married to Mary Allen for twenty-one years until her death in an accident at the shipwright's yard where she was employed as a labourer. Only then was it discovered that she was a woman. See, 'The Female Husband', *Times*, 17 and 19 January 1829. Following the death of her 'husband' Mary Allen was harassed by the mob, who believed she must in fact be a man.

⁴⁰ For further discussion of passing women and the 'female husband', see Donoghue, *Passions* (n. 15), 59–86; Julie Wheelwright, *Amazons and Military Maids: Women who Dressed as Men in the Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness* (London, 1989); and Dianne Dugaw, *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry, 1650–1850* (Chicago, 1989). On Fielding's somewhat contradictory attitudes towards female transvestism, see Jill Campbell, "'When Men Women Turn": Gender Reversals in Fielding's Plays', *Crossing the Stage*, 58–79; and Terry Castle, 'Matters Not Fit to Be Mentioned: Fielding's *The Female Husband*', *English Literary History*, 49 (1982), 602–22. Castle concurs with Fielding biographer Pat Rogers in suggesting that Fielding may also have had Charke in mind when writing *The Female Husband* (616–17).

for the actress who favoured ‘breeches’ roles, and may well underpin some of the critical reactions to Vestris’s cross-dressed stage persona. In 1825 James Boaden referred to such theatrical transvestism as ‘vile and beastly transformations’.⁴¹ Two years later, recalling Sarah Siddons’s pioneering travesty performance as Hamlet in 1776, Boaden commented ‘were she *but* man, she would exceed all that man has ever achieved in Hamlet’.⁴² He negates Siddons’s achievement by chastising her for what she is not; yet, speaking of Dorothy Jordan’s travesty performances, he warns ‘did the lady really look like man, the coarse *androgynus* would be hooted from the stage’.⁴³ Thus he traps the cross-dressing actress in a double bind: mimic the man too successfully and your audience will reject you as unnatural; remain too much like a woman and you will lack credibility in your role, and only ever be a failed man.

Boaden’s concern is to shore up an exclusively masculine domain against female trespassers, but his remarks also smack of homophobic anxiety. William Oxberry’s derisive comment on Vestris’s predecessor in the role of Giovanni lends itself to similar interpretation: Miss Burrell (later Mrs Gould), he tells us, was a lady ‘of such masculine habits, as to bear the cognomen of “Joe Gould” throughout the country’.⁴⁴ Oxberry goes on to quote the *Theatrical Inquisitor* of June 1820, which argued that Vestris had de-feminised and therefore debased herself in accepting this role:

We pity Madame Vestris, from every consideration by which her performance of *Don Giovanni* has been attended. The disgusting woman who undertook this libertine character at its outset [Mrs Gould], prepared us very fully for the only result that can ever be drawn, in the nicest hands, from its loathsome repetition; and we, therefore, feel bound to treat it as a part which no female should assume, till she has discarded every delicate scruple by which her mind or her person can be distinguished (Oxberry, *Oxberry’s*, 96–7).

A few weeks later, the same journal went further, denigrating Vestris’s acting talents and ultimately advising her to ‘rather do anything than adhere to a task that is fraught with viler consequences than we shall venture to describe’: the thing deemed too vicious to articulate here is perhaps the fear that Vestris’s stage transvestism expressed, facilitated or in some way encouraged sapphic desire, corrupting impressionable young women in the audience who might be lured into following suit.

Some critics blamed Elliston (the manager of Drury Lane) for pressuring Vestris to don the breeches, insisting that feminine scruples had initially made her reluctant to do so, and that Elliston had had to pay her well above the odds to ensure she would continue.⁴⁵ Evidence suggests however that although she never specialised solely in travesty roles, she sought them out of her own accord, using her

⁴¹ *Memoirs of the Life of John Philip Kemble, Esq.*, 2 vols. (London, 1825), II, 334.

⁴² *Memoirs of Mrs Siddons*, 2 vols. (London, 1827), I, 283. See Kristina Straub, ‘Guilty Pleasures’, 148.

⁴³ *Life of Mrs Jordan*, 2 vols. (London, 1831), I, 46.

⁴⁴ Oxberry, *Oxberry’s Dramatic Biography*, V, 91–106 (97).

⁴⁵ See *Drury Lane Journal: Selections from James Winston’s Diaries*, 21. Winston was acting manager for Elliston at Drury Lane from 1819, and had complete charge of hiring actors and of negotiating salaries and conditions of employment: his journal, therefore, carries considerable authority as a record of Vestris’s business relationships with her managers.

popularity in breeches as additional leverage in negotiating salaries with her managers. On 18 April 1825 Charles Dibdin, Jr., brought out his new play *The Colonel's Come, or la femme soldat* at the Surrey theatre, in which 'the principal character was a female Colonel, played very effectively by Mad. Simon'. 'Madame Vestris came several times to see this piece', he recalled, 'and regretted (as I was informed) that the piece was not done at the Haymarket, where she would have performed the Colonel'.⁴⁶ Her success on the popular stage also enabled her to cross-over to more serious roles. From 1821, she was engaged to sing in Italian operas at the King's Theatre, where her contract with William Ayrton, the musical director, stipulated that she would take those 'characters in male attire':⁴⁷ under these terms she created trouser roles in the London premières of several Rossini operas, including Pippo in *La gazza ladra* (1821), Malcolm Graeme in *La donna del Lago* (1823), Edoardo in *Matilde di Shabran* (1823) and Arsace as *Semiramide* (1824), with the composer himself conducting.

Vestris's phenomenal popularity in the 1820s seems to fly in the face of critical condemnation of the breeches part, supporting Donoghue's argument that 'the figure of the female cross-dresser was read in many different ways, depending on the circumstances, what her motives were thought to be, and how much she seemed to threaten the powers of men over women'.⁴⁸ By these criteria, Vestris seems to have insured herself as fully as possible against the risk of rejection. Unlike Charke, there is no evidence that she carried her transvestism into real life. Although she was frequently the focus of gossip and speculation, denounced by some as little better than a prostitute, nothing has emerged to suggest she was ever suspected of straying beyond the bounds of heterosexuality. Indeed, Vestris is unusual amongst actresses of the nineteenth century in that she exists for us only through the male gaze: she published no memoirs of her own, female opinion on her performances remains elusive, and during her life she seems to have had little to do with other women in general – even her close confidantes seem to have been men. Her surviving letters concern business matters, affording few glimpses of her thoughts, aspirations or inner life.

If Vestris's personification of the Don in Moncrieff's *Giovanni in London* is significant as a reflector of contemporary attitudes towards gender and sexuality, then her masquerade can also tell us a great deal about the reception of Mozart and Da Ponte's character in pre-Victorian London. Writing in November 1818 Charles Lamb saw in the Italian operatic Don 'something repulsive and distasteful to us': repelled by the image of masculinity Mozart and Da Ponte had portrayed, he cited Leporello's Catalogue aria as a 'disgustful insult to female unhappiness'. But in Moncrieff's sequel at the Olympic Theatre, Lamb perceived a 'free, fine, frank-spirited, single-hearted creature, turning all the mischief into fun as harmless as toys,

⁴⁶ *Professional and Literary Memoirs of Charles Dibdin the Younger*, ed. George Speaight (London, 1956), 143–4.

⁴⁷ 'Engagement [ms] between John Ebers and Lucie Elisa Vestris', British Library, Additional MS 52335, f. 32. See also the manuscript terms of her engagement at the King's Theatre and signed contract, dated 24 May 1822, Westminster City Archives, H2, 291.

⁴⁸ *Passions*, 87.

or children's *make-believe*'. Addressing Miss Burrell in the role of Giovanni, he added, 'you have taken out the sting from the evil thing, by what magic we know not, for there are actresses of greater mark and attribute than you [...]. We have seen you triumph over the infernal powers; and pain, and Erebus, and the powers of darkness, are henceforth "shapes of a dream"'.⁴⁹ In Lamb's view, therefore, the cross-dressed woman emasculated the Don, distanced the audience from his aggressive sexuality, removed the action to the realms of fantasy and let more humour in. Similar thoughts were expressed by Robinson in 1822: 'there is an air of irony and mere wanton and assumed wickedness which renders the piece harmless enough'.⁵⁰

For Leigh Hunt, even 'Mozart's divine music' could not make the arch-villain *Don Giovanni* 'a decent gentleman or goodnatured'. He condemns his 'heartless rakery', and cannot 'put up with him' until he is suffering the torments of hell-fire for his crimes.⁵¹ This suggests that, like many among the London Italian opera audience, Hunt seems not to have responded to the comic dimension of Mozart and Da Ponte's opera, but rather received the work in terms of sentimental morality. For Hunt, therefore, Vestris's performance in Moncrieff's sequel provided a much needed comic antidote:

that pleasant mitigated rogue, *Giovanni in London*, who begins with making hell itself merry, and seduces the very furies into good-humour, – how can we help liking him? He is a contradiction to all continuities of pain – a vindication of the eternally renovated youth and fair play of nature [. . . in] another set of adventures, more various and good-humoured than the Opera.

Personified by a cross-dressed actress – a non-authoritative, non-dominant and ultimately impotent manifestation of masculinity – Don Giovanni is rendered safe, comforting and reassuring. He becomes a parody of himself, of Mozart and Da Ponte's opera, and of the male privilege he represents – an ironic transformation reinforced by his contrived marriage to Constantia at the end. However, as we have seen, to draw the line here belies the true complexity of the situation. When the wide-ranging responses to her performances are considered in the context of early nineteenth-century gender constructs and sexual mores, we see that Vestris's travesty of the libertine did not simply tame him, but opened up dizzying dramatic possibilities: by assuming his garb, she freed herself to challenge and manipulate accepted boundaries of gender, sexuality and desire, articulating and objectifying subversive currents within late Georgian society to an extent that both disturbed and exhilarated her London audiences.⁵²

⁴⁹ Charles Lamb, Review of Thomas Dibdin's *Don Giovanni, or a Spectre on Horseback*, *Examiner* (22 November 1818).

⁵⁰ Quoted in Williams, *Madame Vestris: A Theatrical Biography*, 58.

⁵¹ Leigh Hunt, Review of *Giovanni in London* at Drury Lane, *Examiner* (4 June 1820).

⁵² I am grateful to Sophie Fuller and Christopher Fox for their helpful comments and encouragement during the preparation of this article.