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**A STAGE UNDER PETTICOAT GOVERNMENT:  
ITALIAN INTERNATIONAL ACTRESSES IN THE AGE OF QUEEN VICTORIA**

**Giovanna Buonanno**

**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree of PhD**

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*Dedico questo lavoro alla memoria di mio padre  
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## DECLARATION

Chapter 4 of this thesis includes selected material from my thesis *Adelaide Ristori's Shakespeare*, submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of MA in Comparative Literary Theory at the University of Warwick in 1992.

## Summary

The aim of this thesis has been to document the English careers of the two nineteenth-century Italian International actresses Adelaide Ristori and Eleonora Duse. The English careers of Duse and Ristori are discussed in the light of both the nineteenth-century debate which developed in England on the role and nature of the actress, and the reception of foreign stars on the English stage and the ensuing discussion on the way foreign theatre stars conformed to, or contravened, prevailing images of English womanhood.

Chapter 2 looks into the role and status of the actress from the mid-nineteenth-century to the fin de siècle by deploying critical tools offered by feminist theatre criticism. It is an attempt to define the role of the nineteenth-century actress as a professional woman and draw attention to the voyeuristic nature of nineteenth-century theatre where actresses were put on display: on the one hand they were admired and visually possessed by their audiences, but on the other, they were doomed, as women who made a public show of their bodies, to be social outcasts.

Chapter 3 attempts a chronology of foreign actresses on the English stage and focuses on their reception which provides a basis for comparison between English and foreign nineteenth-century actresses.

Chapter 4 and 5 respectively, reconstruct Ristori's and Duse's English careers. Issues tackled in the previous chapters resurface here to provide a critical angle in trying to evaluate their reception in Victorian England.

The conclusion endeavours to pull together the different lines of this study and points to possible lines of research to be pursued in the future in the field of women in theatre.

## NOTE

The following abbreviations will be used:

Burcardo, a. R.	Rome, Biblioteca Teatrale del Burcardo, autografi Ristori.
M. A., f. R.	Genoa, Civico Museo Biblioteca dell'Attore, fondo Ristori.
T. M., D. f.	London, Theatre Museum, Duse file.
T. M., R. f.	London, Theatre Museum, Ristori file.

Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

During the nineteenth century the English theatre world witnessed a steady increase in the number of women who went on the stage. Not only were women increasingly drawn to the traditional profession of actresses, but they were also interested in a career in management and direction and, as the century wore on, a growing number of women turned to playwriting. The two previous centuries had also seen a great surge of women in theatrical professions, as recent studies have shown, but the attraction of the stage on women in the nineteenth century was such as to encourage a great number of new recruits among women who were not the offspring of theatrical families.<sup>1</sup>

The growth of women working in the theatre in the nineteenth century gave vent to opposing reactions. In her book *Enter the Actress* Rosamund Gilder posits 1856 as a turning point in the history of women in theatre and hails the beginning of a new era. She argues that with the death of the English actress and theatre manager Madame Vestris in 1856:

The tale of the pioneer women in the theatre comes to an end. In acting and playwriting, in management and direction, women had won an undisputed place upon the stages of the world. The day of innovation was over. The day of achievement was, and still is, at hand.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, the fact that women had won an undisputed place in the theatre world was begrudged by conservative nineteenth-century men. Writing at the turn of

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1. See Elizabeth Howe, *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama 1660-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

2. Rosamund Gilder, *Enter the Actress: The First Women in the Theatre* (London: Harrop, 1931), p.291. Gilder's book focuses on the life of major theatrical women from Theodora to Lucy Vestris. Its many insights into the position of actresses in a male-dominated theatrical world make her book a valid contribution and still a useful starting point for the study of women in theatre.

the century on the Victorian theatre, A.B. Walkley expresses bewilderment at the overwhelming presence of women on the stage and when looking at the position of the 'player woman' in the theatre, he notices that she stands "in a much more comfortable position than the player man". He then argues that:

On the stage all the advantages fall to what our forefathers called the spindle side (...) The stage is under petticoat government.<sup>3</sup>

Walkley and Gilder express contentious views on women and theatre, Gilder pointing constructively to the active and increasingly important role of women in the theatre, Walkley offering an image redolent of nineteenth-century views of ruling Britannia and resentful that women were usurping the role traditionally assigned to men in the theatre. Both comments, nonetheless, point out that Victorian England fostered a unique age of female protagonism on the stage and marked a watershed from the time when, as Gilder puts it, "the theatre was an Eveless paradise" and even from when "women's contribution toward the scenic investiture of the stage was confined to their own charming presence."<sup>4</sup>

The nineteenth-century theatre saw also the rise and development of the international touring circuit, with England as a favourite destination among female touring stars who became major box office attractions and international theatrical icons.

I shall take 1856, the year when Gilder's book of pioneering theatrical women ends as my starting point as it coincides with the first tour in England of Adelaide Ristori. I intend to explore the days of achievement that Gilder describes following Madame Vestris' death throughout

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3. A.B. Walkley, *Frames of Mind* (London: Richards, 1899), p.60

4. Gilder, pp.xv-xvii.



the second-half of the nineteenth century and positing as its end the 1900 London tour of Eleonora Duse.<sup>5</sup>

I have chosen the standpoint of two Italian international actresses who played many successful seasons in England always to full houses because a critical look at Ristori and Duse as foreign actresses in Victorian England reveals a web of cross-cultural influences and lends itself to comparative analysis. Their careers mark two different moments of the nineteenth-century "Actor's Theatre", Ristori being a foremost representative of the *grande attore* theatre and Duse expressing its epigonic phase, often referred to as the *mattatore* phase and which stretches into the twentieth century, preceding the advent of the "Director's Theatre."<sup>6</sup> The relationship between the two actresses was both intense and controversial, divided between the possibility for

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5. A chronology of Ristori's and Duse's English careers is presented in Appendix to this thesis. Ristori played in England at regular intervals from 1856 to 1882. Duse played successive tours in England in the first decade of the twentieth century and, after her eleven years retreat from the stage, she performed again in London in 1923. I have limited my discussion of her English career, however, to her fin de siècle tours and chosen 1900 as an endpoint not only because it marks the beginning of the new century, but also because in that year Duse offered her last significant fin de siècle role, that of Paula Tanqueray in Pinero's *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*. In later tours she relied on previous roles and added a few new ones, especially out of the pool of D'Annunzio plays. The Duse-D'Annunzio theatrical partnership has been amply documented; see in English, among others, William Weaver, *Duse: A Biography* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984) and Susan Bassnett's 'Eleonora Duse' in Stokes, John, Booth, Michael R., and Bassnett, Susan, *Bernhardt, Terry, Duse: The Actress in Her Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). The 1923 tour deserves more than a passing mention in a footnote, as it signals Duse's return to the stage in a reduced and renewed repertoire—see Appendix—but it goes beyond the scope of this thesis.

6. The definition of "Actor's Theatre" is suggested by Roberto Alonge in his *Teatro e spettacolo nel secondo Ottocento* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1988), p.17 and is shared by Italian theatre historians who usually agree that nineteenth-century Italian theatre was dominated by actors, playwriting being greatly hampered by censorship. On the shift from the *grande attore* to the *mattatore* see Mirella Schino, 'Sulla tradizione attorica: la nuova recitazione alta in Italia alla fine dell'Ottocento', *Teatro e Storia*, 8 (1990), 59-98 who points to the relationship between the changing political scene and the theatre world in the years spanning from the Risorgimento to the 1890s. I shall discuss features of *grande attore* theatre in chapter 4 and of its later development in chapter 5.



Ristori of appointing Duse as her successor and acknowledging her status as greatest Italian actress, mirrored by Duse's longing for Ristori's approval, and the mutual awareness that differences in acting styles, repertoire and their representation of womanhood set a huge divide between them.<sup>7</sup>

Their careers in England span two different moments of the Victorian age, Ristori's stretching between the 1850s and the early 1880s, while Duse's roughly occupied the fin de siècle. Different and contrasting images of women, with the Perfect Lady of the mid-century increasingly being challenged by the intellectual New Woman, characterize these two periods.

Current feminist scholarship will provide a major framework and will be bolstered by studies in Reception Theory and Theatre Semiotics which have respectively focussed on the active role of readers/spectators and the notions of the performance as a text.

In recent years feminist criticism has concerned itself with the theoretical discourses on representations and the notion of woman as a construct and the way these are deployed in feminist approaches to the study of theatre.<sup>8</sup>

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7. The relationship between the two great actresses is documented by Mirella Schino who has collected their correspondence in 'La Duse e la Ristori', *Teatro Archivio*, 8 (1984), 123-181. References to their correspondence will appear later on in this thesis.

8. A recent survey of feminist theatre criticism is Elaine Aston's, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1995), which draws attention to the belated influence feminist thought has had on the study of theatre. This issue was first tackled as early as 1981 by Nancy Reinhardt in "New Directions for Feminist Criticism in Theatre and the Related Arts", in Elizabeth Langland and Walter Gore, eds, *A Feminist Perspective in the Academy: The Difference It Makes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). Although Reinhardt is less concerned with theatre as performance than with dramatic texts and female heroines, nonetheless she invites feminist theatre historians to "re-examine the visual evidence of past productions" and analyze the distinction between central male and peripheral female space in the theatre. Since then, most of the work in feminist theatre critique has drawn on studies concerning women and representation in film, media and the visual arts as spearheaded by Laura Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 3 (1975), 6-18. Drawing on Freudian and Lacanian



I shall attempt to reconstruct the image of the international nineteenth-century Italian actress through reviews and eyewitness accounts which form the primary sources of this thesis and describe the way in which prevailing views of womanhood impinge on the construction of the image of the actress of the day. The role of critics was crucial in that they shaped the horizon of expectation of their audience and regulated the conventions of seeing of their interpretive communities.<sup>9</sup> Theories of reception applied to the theatre suggest possible ways in which theatre interpretive communities are created and their horizon of expectation is shaped. They draw attention to 'rules of the game' which are usually at work, despite the different conventions of seeing of different communities.<sup>10</sup> In the nineteenth-century theatre the role of advance publicity, for instance, was crucial in creating the

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psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey suggests that mainstream Hollywood cinema constructs its spectator as male and tends to direct his voyeuristic gaze at the women on the screen, who in turn are confined to their traditionally exhibitionist role of being "simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance being coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness". Women's to-be-looked-at-ness results in what Berger describes as a two-faceted nature of the woman who is constantly aware of being looked at and tends also to direct the gaze to herself, "and so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her" (John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), p.46). Both Mulvey and Berger's analyses can be deployed in order to define the nature of the female performer, who makes a public display of herself.

9. The concepts of horizon of expectation and specific disposition of the reader are developed by Hans Robert Jauss in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), that of interpretive communities by Stanley Fish in *Is there a Text in this Class?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980) who are both representative of Reader-Response Criticism. Reader Response Criticism and Reception Theory with their emphasis on the productive, interpretive role of the reader and their attempt to deconstruct the official literary canon have influenced the study of theatre. A survey of theories of reception in the theatre is presented in Susan Bennett's *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London: Routledge, 1990).

10. See Marvin Carlson, 'Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance', in *Theatre Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp.10-25.



audience's expectations around foreign stars. As I shall argue, the specific disposition to view Italian actresses as southern and exotic and to consider their performances equal to those of operatic *primadonnas* is quite apparent in the reviews, which are often scattered with voyeuristic comments, drawing attention to the visual quality of the foreign actress's performance. Reviews provide clues for the reading strategies of the audience and by inviting comparison between foreign stars point also to the specific disposition of audiences to be attracted to foreign actresses pitted against each other.

I shall attempt a cross-cultural analysis of nineteenth-century female performers who attained their status as texts by means of their peculiar acting style and body language which enabled them to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries.<sup>11</sup>

In chapter 2 I shall discuss the image and reality of the nineteenth-century actress, from the mid-nineteenth century to the *fin de siècle*. The contemporary debate on actresses will be analyzed in the light of feminist critique and will provide us with an insight into the social status of actresses, who were often seen as 'public women'.<sup>12</sup> I shall

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11. The centrality of the actress's body language is emphasized in feminist approaches to the study of theatre, insofar as the female performer is "the author of a potentially subversive theatrical sight/site in mainstream historical stages", and the "creator of an alternative text to the male-authored text in which she is framed." (Aston, *Introduction*, p.32). The notion of the actor as text and the notion of reading the actor have originated in theatre semiotics and draw especially on the work of theatre semioticians, such as Patrice Pavis and Marco de Marinis on the performance text/*testo spettacolare*. For a semiotic approach to the actor as text see, among most recent works, Ian Watson, "'Reading' the Actor: Performance, Presence, and the Synesthetic", *New Theatre Quarterly*, 42 (1995), 135-146.

12. As Auerbach argues, even though in Victorian England the use of the phrase 'public woman' for performer and prostitute alike was a social liability for the actress, still it endowed her "with the fallen woman's incendiary glory without dooming her to ostracism and death". In an age when most women were confined to a domestic life, actresses came to transcend their "prescribed social function of self-negating service to

then argue for the 'paradox of the actress' who, as an object to be looked at, is admired and visually possessed by her audience, but as a woman who makes a public show of her body is doomed to be a social outcast.

In chapter 3 I shall look at international female stars who, with their different repertoires and acting styles invited comparison with English actresses and called into questions prevailing views of English womanhood.

Chapter 4 and 5 reconstruct the English careers of Ristori and Duse, where issues tackled in previous chapters will resurface and provide the basis for evaluating their reception in Victorian England.

The conclusion will summarize the insights offered by this work and point to possible lines of research to be pursued in the future.

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live out their own myth", beyond the pale of family. See Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p.205.



## 2. THE ACTRESS IN THE AGE OF QUEEN VICTORIA: IMAGE AND REALITY

### (i) Victorian Women and the Case of Actresses

A major feature of Victorian society was the encroachment on middle and upper class women of the model of dutiful wife and guardian of the home and the ensuing tendency to confine women's lives and activities to the domestic sphere.

Vicinus has argued that the Victorian ideal of the perfect woman descended from the early nineteenth-century ideal of the perfect wife devoted to a series of homely tasks, such as childbearing. As the century wore on, however, the emphasis was less on the woman's domestic activities than on her role as guardian of the hearth, which gave way to the model of a perfect (and idle) lady.<sup>1</sup>

As I shall argue in this chapter, the all-pervasive model of perfect, idle lady made the position of professional women conspicuous, all the more so if the chosen profession contravened principles of modesty and entailed some degree of public display, as was the case with actresses.

The nature of woman, her role in society and her relation to man was clearly defined by John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*, first published in 1865. In the lecture 'Of Queen's Gardens' which forms the second part of his book and is mainly concerned with suitable forms of education for women (the lilies of the title), Ruskin clearly states that there are fundamental differences between the nature of man and that of woman, the former finding his best strength in "his intellectual work", the latter in "her daily deeds and character."<sup>2</sup> A major concern was the definition of the

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1. See Martha Vicinus, 'Introduction: The Perfect Victorian Lady', in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. by Martha Vicinus, 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. IX-XI.

2. John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (1865; London: Allen, 1907), p.9.

guiding function of woman and how this could be reconciled with "her true wifely subjection". This reconciliation was achieved by pointing to the differences in character between men and women which accounted for their different functions:

The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender(...) The woman's power is for rule, her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, decision(...) By her office and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation(...) Within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error. This is the true nature of home (...) Wherever a true wife comes, home is around her, home is wherever she is.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore the guiding function of woman was restricted to the home: "woman's true place" and woman's education should be such as to strengthen her role as guardian of the home, as well as to "enable her to understand, and even to aid, the work of men."<sup>4</sup>

As Vicinus argues, Ruskin's vision of girls as "lilies to be plucked" was considered to be the norm in Victorian society, whereas the progressive ideals put forward by John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women*, as the marriage between intellectual and emotional equals, for instance, were perceived as an aberration.<sup>5</sup>

That the realm of woman should be the home and her major aim in life marital bliss was confirmed by Coventry Patmore in his poem *The Angel in the House* which provided a label for the passive, selfless woman Victorian England was eager

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3. Ruskin, p.98.

4. Ruskin, p.102.

5. Vicinus, 'Perfect Lady', p.x.



to celebrate. The angelic nature of woman descended, according to Patmore, from her "devout disposition" and "angelical countenance" and was heightened by her will which was "indomitably bent on mere submissiveness to the man."<sup>6</sup>

As Dijkstra has argued, the paragon of virtue and renunciation created by men and imposed on women responded to a mid-nineteenth century "male fantasy of ultimate power and ultimate control— of having the world crawl at his feet."<sup>7</sup> However, women also echoed male views of the female and contributed to theorizing the proper Victorian lady. A handbook devised to show young women how to "suffer and be still" written by Sarah Ellis in 1839 exalted woman's function as guardian of the home and called on the wife's moral power to provide a safe shelter for her husband, once he has performed his "necessary avocations of the day". At home, sustained by his wife, he should be able to keep a "separate soul for his family, his social duty and his god" and his wife should become to him "a kind of second conscience, for mental reference, and spiritual counsel, in moments of trials."<sup>8</sup> The confinement of women to the domestic sphere descended, in Ellis' view, from woman's inability to actively partake of the social scene, due to her inherently vapid nature:

Woman, with all her accumulation of minute disquietudes, her weakness, and her sensibility, is but a meagre item in the catalogue of humanity; but, roused by a sufficient motive to forget all these, or rather, continually forgetting them, because she has

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6. Coventry Patmore, *Poems*, ed. by Frederick Page (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p.149.

7. Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-De-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.19.

8. Sarah S. Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (New York: Appleton, 1839), p.46.

other and nobler thoughts to occupy her mind, woman is truly and majestically great.<sup>9</sup>

The literary glorification of woman as angel of the hearth on the one hand, and her legally sanctioned exclusion from the public sphere on the other, helped to shape Victorian society according to a clear-cut division into two gendered spheres, one public which was taken up by men and the other private which was the realm of women.

Another element which helped to sustain a gendered society was the strengthening of the double standard. Throughout the century women's access to education was severely restricted, the first colleges for women not being founded until the late 1840s. In 1863 the Cambridge Local Examinations were finally opened to women and in 1881 women were admitted to Cambridge degrees but they were still not allowed to graduate. In the field of legislation regulating divorce and property, for instance, the double standard seemed to be the rule. The Matrimonial Causes Acts which were introduced in 1857 are a case in point. These enabled men to divorce their wives on grounds of adultery alone; women, on the other hand, in order to divorce their husbands had to prove them guilty of adultery plus cruelty, incest, rape of another woman or other crimes. As far as private property was concerned, for a long time women were considered to be only their husbands' 'chattel' and not until 1872, with a Married Woman's Property Act were wives allowed to keep £200 of their own income.

As Philippa Levine has pointed out, the gendered order of society posited the family as its core which became the site of confined domestication, as well as a main element of the "polarized ordering of the social fabric."<sup>10</sup> According to Levine:

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9. Ellis, p.54.

10. Philippa Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment* (London: Blackwell, 1990), p.10.



The binary opposition of home and work, of private and public translated into and percolated through a bewildering range of thought, action and material circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

An instance of the all pervasive "polarized ordering" can be found in paintings and the mainstream iconography of Victorian women. Roberts has shown how early Victorian art marked a shift from the sensuous representation of women intended to excite the viewer's senses, towards a representation of women which appealed to the viewer's sentiments.<sup>12</sup> The emphasis tended to fall on scenes from domestic life rather than on the tactile surface qualities of womanly beauty. An overriding image of womanhood in early Victorian painting was that of the subordinate wife "contentedly involved in ministering to the comforts of their husbands and children," a good example being offered by Hicks' painting *Woman's Mission: Companion to Manhood* which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1863 and depicted a woman with upturned face expressing loving concern, in the role of consoler to a grief-stricken husband.<sup>13</sup> Hicks' painting along with others such as Ford's *The Last of England* exalted the role of the woman as wife prescribed by Ruskin and seemed to meet the demands of mainstream culture which tended to prefer reassuring and homely settings while it frowned on aberrations such as paintings of "odd", unmarried, or fallen women.<sup>14</sup>

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11. Levine, p.10.

12. See Helen E. Roberts, 'Marriage, Redundancy and Sin: The Painter's View of Women in the First Twenty-Five Years of Victoria's Reign', in Vicinus, ed., *Suffer*, pp.45-76.

13. Roberts, 'Marriage', p.46.

14. Roberts, 'Marriage', p.75.

The zenith of narrative pictures privileging domestic settings was achieved between the late 1840s and the 1860s when, as mentioned earlier, the ideal of the perfect lady was flourishing. Over these decades paintings tended to present prescriptive models of Victorian women such as the waiting woman and the dutiful wife, and to sentimentalize the wife and husband or the mother and child relationship. Images of confinement and cloistered retreat as well as images of women as sisters of charity were also widespread and paralleled images of women within the enclosure of home and gardens. Paintings also helped to underpin the moral double standard since they tended to depict harlots and fallen women on their own, with no male companion and, at the same time, stress the unbridgeable sexual divide between the virtue of the lady, always wearing her hair up, and the coarseness and moral laxity of Magdalene-like figures who were usually portrayed with their hair down.<sup>15</sup>

A ladylike model of woman was also favoured by changes in women's fashion in the mid-nineteenth century. Dresses helped to mould the image of the "exquisite slave" and highlight woman's passivity, insofar as they were designed to inhibit movements, unlike man's clothing which, conversely, favoured movement. The crinoline became a very fashionable item of clothing in the mid-1850s until well into the 1860s and transformed women into "caged birds" or "upholstered armchairs".<sup>16</sup> Lace corsets and heavy clothing added to the image of the weak and submissive Victorian wife and, what is more, tended to become a badge of belonging to a class and a sign of a family's wealth.

Auerbach has explained that the policing of women was a deliberate measure of the patriarchal order designed to

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15. See Susan Casteras, *Images of Victorian Womanhood in English Art* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1987).

16. On the subject of women's fashion in the Victorian age and its social aspects see Helene E. Roberts, 'The Exquisite Slave: the Role of Clothes in the Making of Victorian Woman', *Signs*, 2 (1977), 544-569 and Elizabeth Wilson and Lou Taylor, *Through the Looking Glass: A History of Dress from 1860 to the Present* (London: BBC Books, 1989).



counterbalance a fear of the power of the female. If, on the one hand, mid-century women were largely domesticated in life as well as in art and even queen Victoria was exalted in art less as queen of the British Empire than as queen of home, on the other, Victorian cultural imagination was in great part pervaded by an "explosively mobile, magic woman", capable of breaking the boundaries of family.<sup>17</sup> As she argues:

While right-thinking Victorians were elevating woman into an angel, their art slithered with images of mermaids(...) The very rigidity of the categories of victim and queen, domestic angel and demonic outcast, old maid and fallen woman, concentrates itself into a myth of transfiguration that glorifies the woman it seemed to suppress.<sup>18</sup>

Auerbach's analysis of Victorian mythic imagination suggests a multi-faceted notion of the female along with powerful images of transforming and ruling womanhood. The overriding image of the angel in the house, confined to the domestic sphere, was, therefore, surreptitiously challenged and counterbalanced by beliefs in and fears of women's "explosive mobility", breaking the boundaries of family:

The preternaturally endowed creature who taunts conventional morality as angel and demon, old maid and fallen woman, seems alien to the approved model of womanhood Victorians were bred to revere. Officially the only woman worthy of worship was a monument of selflessness(...) By contrast, the woman I claim is at the centre of Victorian woman worship seems a monster of ego (...) The repressiveness of Victorian culture

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17. Auerbach, *Woman*, p.43.

18. Auerbach, *Woman*, pp.7-9.

is a measure of its faith in the special powers of woman, in her association with mobility and unprecedented change.<sup>19</sup>

Images of suppressed womanhood are therefore paralleled and challenged by images of transfiguring womanhood. These sets of images stand out as two opposing and constituent facets of Victorian cultural imagination but also affected the lives of numerous Victorian women who tried to subvert male-defined models of femininity and find an outlet for their energies.

As a response to their fencing-in, many Victorian women set out to widen their sphere. In tracing a history of the women's movement in Britain, Ray Strachey argues that discontent started "in individual hearts" in the early decades of the nineteenth century and soon took the form of a reaction to the model of the real lady "who was kept close within the hampering limitations of despised womanhood."<sup>20</sup> A "little tickle of ladylike philanthropy" was a first step made by middle class women towards more socially meaningful actions which were aimed at improving the conditions of working girls. The first categories to receive attention were dressmakers and tailors who formed the greatest part of the female work-force but soon attention was also directed to the conditions of middle class professional women. Those who were forced to earn their own living because they could not marry, usually became teachers and governesses. Efforts were made in order to improve their education and provide them with adequate training which led to the foundations of the first women's colleges in 1848 and 1849. The Society for Promoting Employment of Women founded in 1860 was a major step towards the entry of Victorian women into the professional sphere and soon came to encompass those

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19. Auerbach, *Woman*, pp.185-188.

20. Ray Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (1928; London: Virago, 1978), p.45.



professions usually considered to be a male preserve, as the opening of the London School of Medicine for Women in 1874 seemed to prove. A major objective of the women connected with the cause was the improvement of women's position as regulated by current legislation concerning issues such as divorce, custody of infants, private property and, first and foremost, female suffrage. Strachey points to the difficulties encountered by women devoted to the cause and especially to their fears of appearing unladylike or "worse still, un-maidenly" which was a sign of the bias expressed by Victorian society towards women who tried to find an outlet for their energies beyond the restricted sphere of the family.<sup>21</sup>

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In the general striving of women towards a professional status the case of actresses stands out as a special one. Despite a considerable increase in numbers and the growing opening up of the profession to newcomers, there seemed to be little concern for the actress as a working woman. Casteras has argued that actresses, unlike other working women such as governesses, teachers and even female artists, were a category usually unrepresented in Victorian art and has suggested only one example, *The Poor Actress's Christmas Dinner* by Martineau, which depicts a scene of loneliness and distress. The scant interest shown in actresses by mainstream culture was due to the widespread belief that acting was a career beyond the pale of respectable society.<sup>22</sup> Kent seems to confirm this assumption when he argues that despite a growing interest for working women manifested by

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21. Strachey, p.79.

22. Casteras, p.122.



female activists, little regard was paid to the stage as a career for women, a fact which was probably due to the "movement's concern with respectability, and the stage's want of it."<sup>23</sup>

In order to understand the role of actresses and the nineteenth-century discourse on them it is worth trying to define the image usually conveyed by, and associated with, female performers.

Bassnett suggests that as early as the seventeenth century there had been a growing tendency to reduce female performers to objects of desire and puts forward the case of Nell Gwynn whose fame rested less on her contribution to the theatre than on her liaison with Charles II. This process was due to a general tendency to diminish the social status of women in various areas which had begun in the sixteenth century and intensified in the seventeenth century. The emerging of the actress as an object of desire enhanced her conspicuous image and tended to lower her status to that of a public woman. Furthermore, regulations on dress which strictly marked the divide between respectable women and courtesans, strengthened the actress's conspicuousness insofar as she could "cross legal boundaries in terms of dress" and thereby have greater licence than other women.<sup>24</sup> The commodification of the actress increased considerably as theatre became organized on a more commercial basis:

As the public paid to enter theatres, so part of that transaction involved the establishment of a theoretical property relationship between audience and performer. The actress came into being, the creature

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23. Christopher Kent, 'Image and Reality: The Actress in Society', in *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* ed. by Martha Vicinus (London: Methuen, 1977), pp.94-116 (p.106).

24. Susan Bassnett, 'Struggling with the Past: Women's Theatre in Search of a History', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 18 (1989), 107-112 (pp.109-111).

distinguished as much by her gender as by her skills as performer.<sup>25</sup>

The commodification and conspicuous image of the actress have to be put, on the one hand, in the context of women's social history, and on the other in that of theatre history. In the seventeenth century the theatrical world was divided in an acceptable part which was all male, and an illegal part dominated by women who could not appear on the official stage. Although women were later admitted to the official stage, they had to adjust to a theatre which was based on the authority of the written text and did not comprise the forms of spectacle used in the unofficial theatre, which had traditionally been the realm of female performers. This assumption would seem to imply that the prolonged absence of women from the recognized theatre allowed it to be established according to a patriarchal order, so that even when women returned to it, little could be done to subvert that order.

It would appear that the gendered order of society on the one hand and the organization of the theatre as a male preserve, on the other, were crucial in defining the role and presence of the actress in the nineteenth-century theatre and, what is more, greatly contributed to the diminishing of her social status.

The idea that actresses fell within the category of public women was a consequence of their public display on the stage which sharply contravened Victorian dictates of modesty. However, the actress's disreputable display and the ensuing appeal of her to-be-looked-at-ness mirrored a tendency of Victorian women to emphasize their appearance. Cunnington's analysis of feminine attitudes in the nineteenth century has pointed to Victorian women's "art of presenting a picture rather than a person" as pictures are

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25. Bassnett, 'Struggling', p.111.



meant to be looked at and not supposed to be informative.<sup>26</sup> This process started in the 1840s and reached its peak in the 1850s, a decade of "display." Moving from Cunnington's analysis, I would argue that the actress confirms this tendency in that her appearance and her way of presenting a picture, unlike other women, might be also charged with titillatory sexual connotations.

On the other hand, overriding concern with respectability was a major feature of Victorian society and tended to affect the theatre as well. Crucial changes were carried out in the theatre throughout the nineteenth century and were intended to turn the theatre into a suitable form of entertainment for a growing bourgeois audience, by erasing its most uncouth and morally reprehensible elements.<sup>27</sup> Changes to the playhouse tended to emphasize pictorial effects which were achieved, for instance, by introducing gaslight which enabled the theatre hall to be darkened or by progressively confining the dramatic action beyond the proscenium arch, so that it could be framed as a picture. Acting and playwriting in the nineteenth century both moved towards pictorial modes, to the extent that the drama could be perceived to be a series of "speaking pictures".<sup>28</sup> This tendency towards pictorialism added "a new dimension to the

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26. Willett C. Cunnington, *Feminine Attitudes in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Heinemann, 1935), p.97.

27. The main features of the Victorian theatre will be discussed in the following chapter.

28. The definition is in Martin Meisel, *Realization: Narrative, Pictorial and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) which investigates the strong link between theatre and the visual arts. Meisel argues for the pictorial quality of the nineteenth-century theatre and emphasizes that acting styles codified in the nineteenth century were also fully pictorial, due to increasing concern with composition which tended to displace attitude.

projection of sexual glamour" and encouraged a voyeuristic attitude in the audience.<sup>29</sup>

It could be argued that nineteenth-century voyeuristic theatre emphasized the actress's status as a commodity while severely diminishing her social status. These opposing tendencies seem to define the image of the actress in the nineteenth century and suggest a paradoxical figure whose centre stage role in an increasingly commodified theatre was offset by an exclusion from respectable society.

Claire Tomalin has pointed to the deep uneasiness inspired by actresses which was due, basically, to the impossibility of categorising them and has drawn attention to two opposing strands of comments regarding actresses. Insofar as they were seen to be ambitious, competitive, independent, and often rejected family ties, they aroused social contempt; but as professional women who challenged contemporary stereotypes of passive womanhood, they aroused curiosity, admiration and offered something valuable and inspiring.<sup>30</sup>

The difficulty in assessing their status as professional women was due to the pervasive cliché that all women were originally imitators, and therefore actresses did not possess any particular originality or skill, but were simply successful in exploiting the imitative bent of woman's nature. The actress seemed to embody and magnify a duplicity inherent in the nature of every woman: that of being both surveyor and surveyed as Berger has it, constantly aware of existing as an object to be looked at, exposed to the male gaze.<sup>31</sup> Since they received money for displaying themselves in public, they could be compared to prostitutes and

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29. Richard Findlater, *The Player Queens* (London: Weidenfeld, 1976), p.124.

30. Claire Tomalin, 'The Image of the Actress in the 19th Century' (unpublished paper: University of Warwick, Coventry, 25 October 1993).

31. Berger, p.46.



possibly, as Hankey has remarked, reputed to be even worse than prostitutes because they claimed artistic status.<sup>32</sup>

The notion that theatre should be the realm of woman, firstly, because it was heavily reliant on the natural tendency of women to appear and secondly, because it tended to deal with women's matters, seemed to be a direct consequence of the gendered world-view of Victorian England. This issue was tackled by Walkley in what seems now a ludicrously gendered analysis of the stage:

Drama deals by preference with the domestic affections, marriage, love, jealousy, parental relationship - all matters in which woman cuts at least as important a figure as man. Man the philosopher, man the *strugforlifeur*, man the steady, plodding drudge, "gets no show". The instincts and the emotions are the stuff of drama, and women are the instinctive and emotional sex(...) As you saunter down Regent Street of a fine afternoon, with your eyes open, you may observe the faces of all the men you meet turned successively and automatically and at the same angle towards the same object. That object is a pretty woman, and her passage down the street thus causes a sort of ripple in the crowd of men. But you will never observe the passage of a man causing the same ripple in the crowd of women. The meaning of which is that it is woman's part in life to be looked at, but that it is not man's (...) [Woman] is merely pursuing her *métier de femme* in making herself beautiful on the stage.<sup>33</sup>

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32. Julie Hankey, 'Body Language, the Idea of the Actress, and Some Nineteenth Century Actress-Heroines', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 31 (1992), 226-240, (p.227).

33. Walkley, pp.59-61.

It follows that in Walkley's markedly gendered view, women can gain only advantages from taking to the stage and this would seem to account, in the author's view, for the growth of a stage ruled by petticoats.<sup>34</sup>

It would appear that though Victorian England witnessed an increase in the number of women in professional occupations from as early as the 1850s and although it saw the advancement of the feminist cause as a sharp foil to the dominating ideology of the angel in the house, the actress as a professional woman either inspired controversial judgement or lent herself to ludicrous appreciation. On account of her alleged conspicuousness, the actress came to be perceived as an unknown quantity, as the *Englishwoman's Review* remarked:

The life of an actress is to the world at large a curious *terra incognita* peopled by forbidding phantoms of evil or seductive visions of pleasure and success; as a gifted woman's devotion to art, or the honest and laborious means by which she earns her bread, the vocation of the actress is understood by few.<sup>35</sup>

(ii) Is acting a profession for women?

However, despite the tentative exclusion of the figure of the actress from the contemporary discourse on professional women, the substantial increase of professional actresses in the nineteenth century gave rise to a lively debate as to whether acting should be a profession for women.

The figures concerning women entering the acting profession are shown in various recent studies. McDonald has

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34. Walkley, p.60.

35. Quoted in Kent, p.94.



drawn attention to the efforts made by middle-class women to go on the stage which accounted for the striking increase from 384 professional actresses in 1841 to 3,696 in 1891.<sup>36</sup> Davis has investigated the rise of actresses in major British cities like London, Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Edinburgh and Liverpool, where the theatre scene was extremely lively, and has come to the conclusion that a substantial increase in the number of actresses occurred in the years between 1861 and 1871 and that by 1881 actresses formed a greater proportion of the profession.<sup>37</sup>

Kent suggests dividing the development of the profession into four distinct phases.<sup>38</sup> In the first phase, stretching from 1830 to 1850, the profession was mainly dominated by theatrical families. Besides, theatre was undergoing great changes in organization and had not yet become a very profitable venture and, therefore did not exert a strong appeal for newcomers. However, the situation started to improve in the 1840s, also thanks to the support received by the Royal Family who attended the theatre regularly. During this phase there was an increasing demand for child actresses who were employed in decorative roles such as fairies in pantomimes where they were preferred to child actors. A start as a child actress was also open to girls born outside the theatrical profession who, in some instances, stayed in the profession in adult life as well. An increasing number of women not originally born into theatrical families took to the theatre in the second half of the century. Among other reasons that I shall discuss later, changes in repertoire privileging bourgeois settings which tended to put forward a middle-class ideal of gentility, boosted a wave of genteel actresses, whose

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36. See Jan McDonald, 'Lesser Ladies of the Victorian Stage', *Theatre Research International*, 13 (1988), 234-249 (p.247).

37. Davis, 'Actresses', p.11.

38. Kent, pp.94-95.



acquaintance with polite society guaranteed a credible rendering of the new repertoire.<sup>39</sup>

The opening up of the profession to outsiders was a central feature from 1850s to 1870s, the second phase in Kent's model. By the 1870s, women had achieved fairly strong positions in the theatre and took to other related occupations such as teaching acting and elocution or giving lectures and readings. A further development was achieved in the third phase which encompassed the final decades of the nineteenth century when "women of intelligence and artistic ideals" entered the profession. The 1880s and 1890s paved the way for a period stretching up to the eve of World War I when women's place in the theatre reached an unparalleled importance, not only in their capacity as actresses but also as directors, playwrights and producers.<sup>40</sup>

Davis has discussed why middle-class women started to feel the appeal of the stage and to what extent the stage benefited from middle-class recruits. She suggests that, despite middle class contempt for the stage as an immoral activity which was deemed to be unsuitable for women, certain aspects of middle class women's education and socialization seemed to be well suited to the theatrical world:

As performers, women did not trespass on the masculine domains of science, literature, or philosophy, but the theatre required of them a curious mixture of assertiveness and self-negation, flamboyance and modesty, intellectuality and emotiveness and active and reactive qualities. For exceptional women who were alert to the dangers and vicissitudes of life outside

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39. Kent, pp.103-104.

40. Kent, pp.113-114.

the home, the theatre offered an utopic world of independence, responsibility, and self-direction.<sup>41</sup>

The influence of middle-class recruits on stage mores was decisive and met the increasing demands of respectability, although it sometimes aroused discontent among actors. Lena Ashwell saw in the newly respectable theatre "a refuge for the incompetent" who were after "a life of ease" and regretted the days of "vagabondage and outlawry" when possession of the artistic temperament was a major requirement.<sup>42</sup>

In Davis' analysis, a key issue to understanding the rise of bourgeois actresses was the steady growth of surplus women throughout the Victorian age, whereby many women were forced into sudden financial self-dependence. Therefore, those who deliberately chose the stage as a profession aimed at fulfilling their financial needs as well as their own artistic leanings. The theatre was, therefore, a palatable alternative for surplus women:

Although its reputation was equivocal, [the theatre] was a well-established field of employment for women, and possibly no more unpleasant than the traditional options. Schoolmistresses and governesses were de-classed by their occupations(...) Women who studied science were 'unwomanly' unless they derived a living by writing. Any branch of literature followed seriously and successfully by a woman branded her as a 'blue'. There were no perfect solutions. The theatre at least kept marriageable women visible, and paid while it trained.<sup>43</sup>

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41. Davis, 'Actresses', p.15.

42. Quoted in Davis, 'Actresses', p.13.

43. Davis, 'Actresses', p.17.



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The nineteenth-century debate on whether acting should be a profession for women was strongly influenced by the overriding concern with respectability and, on the whole, tended to focus primarily on the lot of those new middle class recruits who deliberately took to the stage, rather than on those actresses who were born into theatrical families.

An *Appeal to the Women of England to Discourage the Stage* was published by "A Lady" in 1855.<sup>44</sup> Using a sermon-like tone, this pamphlet challenged the idea that the stage could both instruct and entertain and thereby promote morality and high principles, on account of the harmful effects of the stage upon the actors and actresses who played upon it. She maintained that actor's lives are by nature unreal as they are continuously acting without being able to feel those sentiments and high principles they portray. Actresses are in a most dangerous position, having been educated "in the school of vanity" and only taught to desire applause.<sup>45</sup> A woman who takes to the stage is, she feels, doomed to suffer moral deterioration because the stage, by its own nature, cannot foster "woman's greatest charm" which consists in "a modest, retiring disposition."<sup>46</sup>

The core of the "Lady"'s argument against the stage centres around notions of modesty and propriety:

If a woman can bring herself to assume a pert, flippant manner, and to deliver sentiments in

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44. A Lady, *An Appeal to the Women of England to Discourage the Stage* (London: Masters, 1855).

45. A Lady, p.7.

46. A Lady, p.9.

accordance with it for the amusement of the public; it necessarily follows that she loses much of her native modesty. It must be so; it is only the natural consequence of a disregard to the proprieties of woman's life.<sup>47</sup>

This overt attack on actresses by "A Lady" and her final appeal to her countrywomen to fight against one of the "greatest sources of immorality existing", is a rigid indictment of acting as a profession for women. It was written in a decade when the acting profession was increasingly drawing recruits from the middle-class, while at the same time, bourgeois concern with ladylikeness and respectability was at its peak.

Attempts were made, however, to challenge the stereotypical image of actresses as fair game, though still within the framework of Victorian principles of decency and morality. In an article published in the *National Review*, Eliza Linton reacts to the fact that theatre is considered to have a morally pernicious effect on actresses, but its effect on actors is never debated. She rejects the moral double standard which, as a key feature of Victorian society, tended to surface also in the discourse on theatre:

The comparative deterioration of men does not count; it is only the women who are supposed to be ruined by stage-work(...). It may be that all this is true, and that from chorus girls to primadonnas, from extras to leading ladies, the whole histrionic profession on the spindle side is tainted and defiled; but to us of the outside public, not initiated, there is a ring of injustice, a savour of caste ungenerousness, and a harsh echo of old time prejudice.<sup>48</sup>

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47. A Lady, p.10.

48. Eliza L. Linton, 'The Stage as a Profession for Women', *National Review*, March 1885, 8-19 (p.8).



Linton also challenges the idea that the stage engenders vanity and egotism and argues that almost every profession is not immune from such weaknesses and that, after all, no profession, acting included, should be rejected because of the degree of vanity or egotism it fosters.<sup>49</sup>

It is interesting to notice that the case of acting women is here analyzed in the broader context of professional women and that acting is considered to be an established profession and a suitable alternative for the unsupported female population:

Efforts are being made to enlarge the borders all round, so as to admit women into offices and professions hitherto reserved only for men; and it seems a kind of suicide to condemn the members of a numerous, established, not unfeminine, and in our state of society an absolutely necessary, profession.<sup>50</sup>

However, Linton's defence of acting women is to some extent weakened by a prejudiced view of some aspects of stage life, as well as by her excessive concern for propriety. She shares the widespread belief that the lower ranks of the theatrical profession are not immune from immorality and that especially for the rank-and-file actress, going on the stage is "synonymous with going to perdition". She felt, therefore, that every effort should be made in order to save all "good girls" who enter the profession from being "soiled."<sup>51</sup> In Linton's view, new recruits are most in danger of moral degradation since they are left unprotected and unchaperoned. Those who were born into the theatrical profession, on the other hand, form "a

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49. Linton, p.11.

50. Linton, p.14.

51. Linton, p.10.

nest full of doves", since they are continuously protected by their families and "know all the nets spread by outsiders, and the pitfalls dug behind the scenes."<sup>52</sup> McDonald has recently taken up Linton's point and underlined the difficult position of the outsiders. She explains that famous actresses who were born into theatrical families never appeared in public without a chaperone, so that they could keep their reputation untainted which made them "marriageable" and, in a few instances, even eligible for good marriages, while on the other hand those who had severed family connections for the pursuit of a stage career were vulnerable to allegations of moral looseness and had very slim chances of marrying.<sup>53</sup>

Linton's arguments in favour of the stage as a profession for women are further undermined when she comes to discuss the kind of repertoire which would best suit women. She argues that characters drawn from Shakespeare, like Ophelia or Imogen, cannot "weaken the moral joints of an actress", whereas plays like *La dame aux camélias* and those which drew on the *demi-monde* should be avoided and replaced by plays championing the values of "patriotism, magnanimity, generosity, forgiveness, adversity."<sup>54</sup>

The question as to whether the repertoire of an actress should be "proper" was a major concern for Victorian actresses, as I shall discuss later and, as Linton's article seems to demonstrate, was not a minor issue in making actresses acceptable to society.

Issues of respectability and decorum were also tackled by actresses themselves who were urged to speak out in defence of their profession. Allegations of looseness and debauchery were usually objected to by emphasizing the actresses' model private lives. In the biography of his

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52. Linton, p.17.

53. McDonald, 'Lesser Ladies', p.239.

54. Linton, p.17.



late wife Helena Faucit, Theodore Martin stressed that her life as an artist of the stage never interfered with her "love of the calm delights of a private life" and "the quietude of home", and that her success in society had depended as much on her "gentle, unassuming, bright and generous nature as on her genius."<sup>55</sup> Madge Kendal defined her profession as "one of the most charitable in the world",<sup>56</sup> and in a paper offered in Birmingham she expressed the wish that actors and actresses should lead exemplary lives, so that the theatrical profession could maintain its dignity and the stage could be given "its proper place in the world of Art."<sup>57</sup> Lena Ashwell argued that the stage was not more immoral than other trades but it was continuously degraded by "an amount of humiliating philandering and a mauling sensuality" and wished that women, by having access to better education which would guarantee independence, might be no longer forced to "sell themselves for the necessities of existence."<sup>58</sup>

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The social position of the actress in the nineteenth century has more recently received attention from feminist scholars who have tried to reconsider widespread nineteenth-

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55. Theodore Martin, *Helena Faucit, Lady Martin* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1900), pp.230-231.

56. Madge Kendal, *Dame Madge Kendal By Herself* (London: Murray, 1933), p.1.

57. Madge Kendal, *The Drama: A Paper Read at the Congress of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science* (Birmingham, September 1884), pp.15-16.

58. Lena Ashwell, 'Acting As a Profession for Women', in *Women Workers in Seven Professions* ed. by Edith J. Morley (London: Routledge, 1914), pp.298-313 (p.307).

century views on actresses and have pointed to the independence, assertiveness and power that a woman could enjoy when entering the theatrical world. Auerbach conjures a mythic and powerful image of the Victorian woman turned actress who is capable of turning her conspicuousness into a distinct advantage:

Acting was one of the few professions whereby a woman could transcend her prescribed social function of self-negating service to live out her own myth: to an intelligent, passionate woman the stage offered authority and fame, wealth and glamour, emotional and sexual freedom (...). The questionable social position of the early Victorian actress enhanced her mythic freedom; while the use of the phrase "public woman" for performer and prostitute alike was a social liability, it endowed the actress with the fallen woman's incendiary glory without dooming her to ostracism and death.<sup>59</sup>

An insight into the nature of the actress is offered by Blair who focuses on the actress's power to reverse the usual association of women and their work with private domains. The actress's situation is unique in that she breaks down the usual division between public and private spheres through the public exposure of her private life as well as that of her characters. By bringing into the light of public scrutiny the "naturally secluded private interpersonal experience of women" she is allowed, unlike other women, to indulge in her emotional nature and even "turn her feminine handicaps to advantage."<sup>60</sup>

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59. Auerbach, *Woman*, p.205.

60. Juliette Blair, 'Private Parts in Public Places: the Case of Actresses', in *Women and Space* ed. by Shirley Ardner (London: Croom Helm, 1981), pp.205-228 (pp.205-206).



A key point in Blair's analysis is the evaluation of the actress's function in society which could be described as that of being a "host of informants on women." This definition is crucial, in my view, in that it points to the actress's significant role in making women's lives visible and, moreover, moves towards a reappraisal of the history of acting women as *herstory*:

The actress's job in life is to appear to be many different women from different classes, nationalities and historical periods to her own. To accomplish this she may change her costume, shape, age, features, posture and so on (...). She experiences characters in play through her own body. She becomes an expert on women, but the only outlet for this expertise is to portray more women.<sup>61</sup>

Feminist scholarship has also attempted to reconsider to what extent nineteenth-century theatre, as a male-oriented institution, contributed to underpinning biased views on actresses and produced stereotypical images of them. McDonald gives evidence of the tyranny exerted on actresses by uncouth actor managers who were particularly unscrupulous in exploiting new recruits. Furthermore, she argues that the connection between prostitution and acting was deliberately sought after by actor managers who often tended to advertise their products in a most alluring way, as the example offered of Mrs Worthington "celebrated for the beautiful symmetry of her person in male attire", seems to suggest.<sup>62</sup>

The sexually arousing image of the actress was also enhanced by the *mise en scène*, through the recurring use of tableaux vivants where actresses were arranged so as to

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61. Blair, p.207.

62. McDonald, 'Lesser Ladies', pp.237-238.

suggest classical images drawn from mythology. These living pictures, which were a hallmark of nineteenth-century pictorial theatre had strong sexual connotations and were meant primarily:

to provide a narrative of ideal feminine beauty while the paradigmatic male erotic fantasy of voyeurism was legitimized by the pretense of classical mythology.<sup>63</sup>

Another major issue tackled by feminist scholars concerns the notion of the actress's respectability and tends to show how the efforts to impose respectability on theatre responded to the dictates of patriarchal society and forced actors and actresses to struggle in order to improve their social status. Davis deconstructs the myth of the rise of the actor and argues that records and surveys show that the advantages of middle-class respectability were actually enjoyed by very few actors and even fewer actresses while, even by the end of the Victorian era, most performers had to face unemployment, low wages and social disrepute.<sup>64</sup> Bratton maintains that the period between 1830 and 1890 witnessed a struggle to cleanse and uplift the theatrical profession in order to found the theatre on the patriarchal laws of "order, reason and high art" and reclaim the stage as a male preserve, which eventually culminated in the knighting of Henry Irving in 1895.<sup>65</sup> A last glimpse into the Victorian double standard affecting the theatre world is offered by the fact that the first Dame of the theatre was the fairly obscure May Whitty who received the title in 1918 less on account of her service to the theatre than because of her role as a Sister of Charity in World War I. The first

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63. Davis, *Actresses*, p.125

64. Davis, *Actresses*, p.xiii.

65. Jacky Bratton, 'Working in the Margin: Women in Theatre History', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 38 (1994), 122-131 (pp.125-126)



actress to be created Dame of the British Empire on account of her theatrical career was the American born Genevieve Ward, while Ellen Terry received the title only in 1925, followed by Madge Kendal a year later. The rise of the Victorian actor was not fully paralleled by rise of the Victorian actress.

### (iii) Womanly Women on the Victorian Stage

The strong hold of Victorian patriarchal society forced actresses to appear ladylike. This process was particularly visible in the early decades of the age, whereas the last decades of the century witnessed the rise of modern actresses who had benefited from women's struggle for emancipation and tried to introduce challenging and risqué roles while questioning notions of propriety and decorum.

Donohue has analyzed the theatrical images of women on view to audiences in the burgeoning Victorian theatre and has suggested that the pervasive cliché and pattern was that of the distressed female rescued by the male.<sup>66</sup> In his view, the preoccupation of the age with male sufficiency generated a correlative need to construe the female as helpless and powerless.<sup>67</sup> His review of theatrical images of women starts well before the beginning of the Victorian period with pictures of Sarah Siddons who, despite her frequent choice of strong-minded, assertive characters such as Lady Macbeth, still did not escape the ideal of frail femininity.<sup>68</sup> This pattern is recurrent in images of the

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66. Joseph Donohue, 'Women in the Victorian Theatre: Images, Illusions, Realities', in *Gender in Performance* ed. by Laurence Senelick (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992), pp.117-140.

67. Donohue, p.121.

68. Donohue, p.123.

middle and late Victorian period and points to a continuity in the iconographical representation of theatrical women.

Donohue's analysis would appear to be endorsed by the nature of the repertoire of leading Victorian actresses who tended to privilege "womanly" women or to impose the distressed woman pattern on "unladylike" heroines such as fallen women.<sup>69</sup>

The staple diet of early Victorian actresses was Shakespeare. Helena Faucit and Fanny Kemble both made their professional debut in London as Juliet, Madge Kendal as Ophelia, Ellen Tree as Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, to name only a few among Victorian leading ladies. The characters of Rosalind (*As You Like It*), Imogen (*Cymbeline*), Katherine (*The Taming of the Shrew*), along with those mentioned above, formed the mainstay of the Victorian actresses' repertoire. Richards argues that the Victorians asked their actresses to do the impossible with Shakespeare's heroines who, in most cases, "enjoyed a brand of outspokenness unimaginable in a properly raised Victorian girl." Therefore actresses' studies of Shakespeare's female characters tended to emphasize their womanly features.<sup>70</sup> Plays mainly cast in the tradition of melodramas and comedy of manners were also included but their characters still had to offer a womanly representation of womanhood. As Lady Teazle in an 1874 revival of Richard B. Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*, Mary Wilton was praised for her impersonation of a once foolish but now repentant woman, as the *Daily Telegraph* pointed out:

The womanly instinct which bids Lady Teazle touch and try to kiss her husband's hand, the womanly weakness which makes Lady Teazle totter and trip (...) the

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69. See Donohue's analysis of pictures of Mrs Patrick Campbell as Paula Tanqueray, pp.127-129.

70. Sandra Richards, *The Rise of the English Actress* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.94.



womanly strength (...) and the woman's inevitable abandonment to hysterical grief(...) were one and all instances of the treasured possession of an artistic temperament.<sup>71</sup>

Likewise Ellen Tree, as Olivia in Sheridan Knowles's *The Rose of Arragon*, appeared to be "pervaded by an earnest and thrilling expression of womanly feeling."<sup>72</sup>

Madge Kendal, due to the lack of interesting modern roles for women, often turned to controversial and even vulgar roles and made them sympathetic and acceptable to the public. As Lilian Vavasour in Taylor and Dubourg's comedy *New Men and Old Acres* Kendal scored a success because she managed to give a genteel interpretation of a vulgar girl who had been corrupted by the company of a sporting cousin, and in this way made acceptable a part which would otherwise have been dangerous "in ordinary hands".<sup>73</sup>

The restrictions imposed by the ladylike pattern were reduced if actresses were also actively taking part in the management of the company. Lucy Vestris who managed the Olympic Theatre from 1830 to 1839 and later on the Covent Garden and the Lyceum, and Marie Wilton who managed the Prince of Wales' in the 1860s introduced major changes both in repertoire and theatre organization. Vestris offered a repertoire of burlesques and comic operas that were emended of their grossest and most common elements and, as a result, became a proper entertainment for the bourgeoisie. Gilder acknowledged Vestris' pivotal role in English nineteenth century theatre and described her as a crossroads figure who marked the shift from the pioneering phase of women in

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71. *Daily Telegraph*, 6 April 1874. Quoted in Charles E. Pascoe, *Our Actors and Actresses: The Dramatic List* (London: Blom, 1880), p.22.

72. *Atlas*, 11 June 1842. Quoted in Pascoe, p.218.

73. *Daily News*, 26 October 1869. Quoted in Pascoe, p.236.

theatre to that of full achievement. When Vestris died in 1856:

Robertson was already writing his plays, Jones was five years old, Pinero a baby in arms. In Norway (...) Ibsen was about to become director of the Norwegian National Theatre. Paris, revelling in Scribe, Augier, and Dumas fils, did not even know that André Antoine, who eventually founded a true Théâtre Libre, had just been born to supplant them. Vestris died before her ideas found their full expression, but she had shown the way and others followed in her footsteps.<sup>74</sup>

Among those following in her footsteps was Marie Wilton who further improved on some of Vestris' major innovations in theatre management and gave a boost to the renewal of standard repertoire by staging Robertson's society plays.<sup>75</sup>

Early and mid-Victorian actresses tried to suit the requirements of their age. However, there was probably more to them than their image of angels in the house turned actresses would seem to imply. Scholarship on Victorian actresses has contributed to shape this image and often given great emphasis to their flawless private lives, the only exception being Ellen Terry who by Victorian standards led a fairly disreputable life while she portrayed chaste and ethereal Shakespeare characters at the Lyceum Theatre. *Ladies First* published in 1952 grouped Victorian actresses under captions such as 'Lesser Eminences' and 'Eminently Respectable' in an effort to highlight their womanly image (not surprisingly, late Victorian actresses who could not

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74. Gilder, *Enter*, pp.290-291.

75. More reference to women managers and directors in the nineteenth-century theatre are in Claire Tomalin's, *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens* (London: Viking, 1990). See especially chapter II 'Agreeable and beautiful talents'.



fit into this pattern are not mentioned).<sup>76</sup> Even more recent studies which offer a broader insight into Victorian acting women still tend to frame them within categories such as that of the 'Player Queens', or attempt to map out a history of the rise of the English actress as a historical series of leading ladies.<sup>77</sup> This critical perspective might help to create a sharp contrast with the later generation of unwomanly actresses, but fails to go beyond a canonized view of women in theatre. I would suggest that a reappraisal of the womanly actress should involve a shift from purely anecdotal and biographical works and focus on actresses' roles and their actual position within the theatrical organization, such as Reilly's work on Ellen Tree as an 'actress overlooked', for instance, or Roberts' analysis of the nineteenth-century actresses' contribution to the dress reform movement as they challenged the stereotypical image of the "caged bird" by refusing to wear stays, bustles and corseted clothing. As Aston points out, a major issue in feminist theatre criticism is the deconstruction of the western, male-based canon. This fosters a re-reading of the history of women in theatre by disrupting the categories usually deployed by male theatre historians.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, it would appear that a new critical evaluation of the nineteenth-century actress should go beyond setting a genealogy of leading players and measuring to what extent they conformed to the player queen model and, conversely, should look more deeply into their choices of repertoire and their roles in theatre organization and read them against the pervasive male-fabricated images.

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76. See W. Macqueen-Pope, *Ladies First: The Story of Woman's Conquest of the British Stage* (London: Allen, 1952).

77. See Findlater, *Player Queens* and Richards, *Rise*.

78. Aston, *Introduction*, p.16.

## (iv) The New Woman and the Fin de Siècle.

The publication of the diaries of Marie Bashkirsteff in 1890 fuelled a debate as to whether women should claim their rights and seek independence or rather, should preserve their womanliness by complying with their family duties. This would seem to imply that in the Nineties the notion that a woman could be unwomanly if she entered a profession and fought for her own rights, was still an issue despite the consistent advancement of women's emancipation. The pace of female activism had quickened during the 1880s and by the 1890s access to Higher Education was well established and a new generation of well-educated young women was ready to step into professional life.

George Bernard Shaw addressed the issue raised by Bashkirsteff's diaries in his essay 'The Womanly Woman', which is part of the collection *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, and stands out as a defence of woman's rights and an appeal to women to repudiate their womanliness. Shaw maintained that Bashkirsteff was by no means "a less agreeable person than the ordinary female conformer to the ideal of womanliness, but most conspicuously the reverse."<sup>79</sup> It follows that "unless Woman repudiates her womanliness, her duty to her husband, to her children, to society, to the law, and to everyone but herself, she cannot emancipate herself."<sup>80</sup>

Shaw then suggests that there is a link between the image of a strong-minded and assertive woman projected by Marie Bashkirsteff and Ibsen's heroines as representatives of the New Woman. In England the New Woman was perceived to be *the* unwomanly woman who had lost any claim to modesty and womanliness. It is believed that the term was first introduced by the radical writer Sarah Grand in the columns

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79. George Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (London: Constable, 1929), p.31.

80. Shaw, *Quintessence*, p.41.



of the *North American Review* in May 1894. Shortly after, the New Woman became a popular character in magazines and journals such as *Punch* and the *Yellow Book* and featured in various fin de siècle novels and plays. The New Woman as a female phenomenon was the object of special denigration and mockery. A cartoon published in *Punch* in 1894 under the title 'Donna Quixote' gave an illustration of the type and tended to highlight all the main features usually associated with the New Woman, which Gardner sums up as follows:

She sits plain and bespectacled in an armchair, in her sensible, 'hygienic' or rational dress, book in one hand and latchkey held aloof in the other. She is surrounded by images of disorderly notions (...) the works of Mona Caird, Tolstoy, Ibsen and the *Yellow Book*. Behind her there is the Amazon holding aloft the flag of the divided skirt.<sup>81</sup>

This *Punch* cartoon offers a spoof, two-dimensional image of real-life new women. They were usually young, middle-class and single, and were often depicted as wearing masculine dress and austere coiffure. They had achieved a fairly high standard of education and were devoted to advanced readings and the works of Ibsen. A key issue was financial independence which they had achieved by entering one of the careers normally open to women in the last decades of the nineteenth century, such as teaching, journalism or other white collar occupations. Finally, they were determined to challenge received notions of femininity and due to their commitment to the woman's movement, were forerunners of early twentieth-century suffragettes.

In the field of theatre, New Women were to be found among those women who had chosen the stage as a career and in

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81. Viv Gardner, 'Introduction', in *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914*, ed. by Viv Gardner and Susan Rutherford (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p.4.

their capacity as actresses, acting managers and playwrights, they tried to challenge the authority of actor managers. A main objective of recent feminist criticism in the field of theatre history has been the rediscovery of those women in theatre who have been hidden from history and of those who have been unrepresented in the theatrical canon. In recent years, therefore, growing attention has been directed to the activity of women in theatre at the turn of the century with the aim, on the one hand, of recovering the lost voices of female playwrights and, on the other, of reassessing the importance of fin de siècle actresses.<sup>82</sup>

The New Woman first appeared in the works of male playwrights. Sidney Grundy's *The New Woman* opened in London on 1 September 1894. By offering two versions of the New Woman, the play ridiculed stereotypically fashionable New Women but at the same time depicted a more serious type as a real threat to conventional male-female relationships. A real womanly woman is, however, opposed to both types of New Women and portrayed as the most agreeable of all women in the play. The play, therefore, appears to be on the whole dismissive of the New Woman phenomenon.

Gardner has drawn attention to the peculiar situation of Alma Murray, the actress playing the role of Mrs Sylvester, the serious New Woman in *The New Woman*, and who was herself a New Woman for having been involved in experimental theatre, with the production of Shelley's banned play the *Cenci* and for having taken part in a rather controversial production of Shaw's *Arms and the Man*. The paradox in which actresses were caught up when giving life to characters challenging their own notions about women in real life is

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82. The works of New Women playwrights are collected in Viv Gardner and Linda Fitzsimmons, eds, *New Woman Plays* (London: Methuen, 1991) and discussed in Jan McDonald, 'New Women in the New Drama', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 21 (1990), 31-42. The New Woman in the theatre is amply documented and debated in the essays collected in Gardner and Rutherford, eds, see footnote n.81.



understood to be inherent in the nature of fin de siècle theatre because the theatre, despite its being an unconventional world, still purveyed very conventional views on women. Most of the works produced by male playwrights at the turn of the century offered antipathetic portraits of the New Woman, as is the case, for instance, with Pinero's *The Notorious Mrs Ebbsmith*. At the beginning of the play the heroine comes across as a quintessential New Woman. She lives with her companion but does not intend to get married and writes pamphlets against the institution of marriage. Her costume is an austere, brown dress, similar to rational dresses. However, later on in the play she undergoes a transformation and recovers her apparently lost womanliness. But this transformation from New Woman to Womanly Woman affects Agnes Ebbsmith deeply and by the end of the play she repudiates both her feminist ideals and her coquettish new image and decides to lead a cloistral life.

Feminist criticism has shown how these works, though they testify to the emergence of the New Woman, always portray her as a figure doomed to failure.<sup>83</sup> Consequently, critics have turned their attention to the works of female playwrights who, by the end of the century, were writing successfully both for the commercial stage and in the area of the New Drama. These dramatists offered their own version of the New Woman and managed to "combine the new ideas and ideology of the Woman Question with a grasp of the reality of the lives of contemporary women."<sup>84</sup>

As for actresses, the 1890s gave a boost to the so-called intellectual actresses whose commitment to Ibsen's plays and New Drama has been amply documented.<sup>85</sup> Janet Achurch,

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83. See especially McDonald, 'New Women'.

84. Gardner, *Sisters*, p.9.

85. See Mary T. Heath 'a Crisis in the Life of the Actress: Ibsen in England' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Massachusetts, 1986); Beverly F. Elliot, 'Ibsen's Women on Stage: Feminist and Anti-feminist Reactions to Selected English Language Productions of *A Doll's House*' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Temple University, 1987).

Elizabeth Robins, Marion Lea and Florence Farr championed Ibsen's works in England throughout the 1890s and, as actress-managers, were later involved in experimental ventures, such as Florence Farr's season of experimental plays at the Avenue Theatre in 1894 and the early twentieth century Little Theatre Movement. New Women actresses who were also involved in management gave their contribution to the 'cause' with the founding of the Actresses' Franchise League in 1908 which produced performances supporting the campaign for female suffrage.<sup>86</sup>

The complex image of the fin de siècle actress who drew on the New Woman and became a forerunner of the suffragettes could also be seen as a product of the complexity of the Nineties.

Elaine Showalter suggests that the 1880s and 1890s were decades of sexual anarchy when all the laws governing sexuality and behaviour seemed to be breaking down. A crisis affected race and class relations and was paralleled by a gender crisis with New Women and male aesthetes redefining the boundaries of femininity and masculinity.<sup>87</sup> Showalter argues that in the popular imagination the 'odd' or 'new' women conflated elements of the lesbian, the angular spinster and the hysterical feminist, but in real life they made their feminine difference the basis for their self-development.<sup>88</sup>

The transforming energies of the New Woman seemed to find a natural outlet in the theatre, but the disruption of the accepted order which they engendered was also perceived to be a threat to the patriarchal order. Robinson discusses the

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86. On the Actresses' Franchise League see Julie Holledge, *Innocent Flowers* (London: Virago, 1981) and Viv Gardner, ed., *Sketches from the Actresses' Franchise League* (Nottingham: Nottingham Drama Texts, 1985).

87. Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (1991; London: Virago, 1992), pp.3-4.

88. Showalter, p.64.



peculiar nature of the fin de siècle female performer when set against the confusion of the 1890s and argues that male images of actresses tended to highlight the protean nature of the actress, her "infinite variety" and often even suggested a link between acting women and hysterics. When considering female characters such as Ibsen's Nora, Wedekind's Lulu and Simon's Zaza, the latter having been devised as a vehicle for Gabrielle Røjane, Robinson argues that the male imagination was fascinated with ideas of role-playing, femininity and hysteria, and with their possible resonance in nineteenth-century notions of acting women:

If the model of fashionable womanhood during the 1850s and 1860s was the *grand cocotte*, or courtesan (...), for the fin de siècle she was supplanted by the hysteric.<sup>89</sup>

As Robinson further explains, the link between histrionics and hysterics was strongly felt in the male imagination at the turn of the century. The divided consciousness of the actress who imitated "a being altogether beyond herself" found a parallel in the seminars and spectacles staged in a Paris hospital by Charcot, where his female patients appeared under hypnosis before a predominantly male audience:

With the expressivity of actresses repeating their roles beneath the insistent gaze of a repetiteur, these women acted out their identifications, adopting poses, reliving roles, and reenacting the past, as

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<sup>89</sup>. Michael Robinson, *Acting Women: The Performing Self in the Late 19th Century* (Inaugural lecture, Loughborough: Loughborough University of Technology, 1991), p.7.

they embodied a pre-existing and unconscious script before the eyes of the male spectator.<sup>90</sup>

The scene described finds a parallel in the successful 1890s play *Trilby* by Paul Potter and based on a novel by Du Maurier.<sup>91</sup> The play focuses on the character of Trilby, a model and fallen woman first, then a successful opera singer. Her singing is, however, not an inborn quality but the product of a trance-like state she is induced into by the mesmeric powers of Svengali, a Jewish pianist. In fact, without the help of Svengali, Trilby has no voice. The play is informed by the late nineteenth-century fascination with the unconscious and its possible relation to acting. But insofar as it bears a resemblance with Charcot's (and later Freud's) experiments on female hysterics, it also strengthens the link between female performers and hysterics and seems to imply that acting and role playing are the product of a disturbed and divided self.

The construction of the image of the actress as a hysteric could be seen as a dark side of the New Woman and a kind of backlash of the patriarchal order aimed at diminishing the disruptive potential of unwomanly women. This points to the paradoxical situation of theatrical New Women who, on the one hand, were forced into uneasy roles of hysterics or nervous women thereby projecting an uncanny image, but on the other, were able to challenge male role models as intellectual actresses and acting managers.

A renewed concern with respectability in the 1890s created further hindrance for actresses. The decade marked a major achievement in the struggle for respectability and

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90. Robinson, p.8.

91. See Paul Potter, *Trilby*, in *The Golden Age of Melodrama* ed. by Michael Kilgariff (London: Wolfe, 1974). The play and its London premiere at the Haymarket Theatre in 1895 is discussed in George Taylor, *Players and Performances in the Victorian Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), pp.162-172. Taylor discusses here at length Beerbohm Tree's 'mesmeric' performance as Svengali.



social recognition which culminated in the knighting of Henry Irving in 1895, but it also produced one of the fiercest attacks on actresses in the nineteenth century. In 1898, the theatre critic Clement Scott gave an interview to the evangelical Christian magazine *Great Thoughts*, published with the title 'Does the Theatre Make for Good?', where he voiced some of the century's prejudices against acting as a profession for women and which is worth quoting at length:

If anyone I loved (...) insisted on going on the stage contrary to my advice I should be terrified for her future and hopeless for her endurance of our affection or even friendship. For stage life, according to my experience, has a tendency to deaden the finer feelings, to crush the inner nature of men and women and to substitute artificiality and hollowness for sincerity and truth and, mind you, I speak from an intimate experience of the stage, extending over thirty seven years (...) It is nearly impossible for a woman to remain pure who adopts the stage as a profession. Everything is against her. The freedom of life, of speech, of gesture, which is the rule behind the curtain, renders it almost impossible for a woman to preserve that simplicity of manner which is after all her greatest charm. But what is infinitely more to be deplored is that a woman who endeavours to keep her purity is almost of necessity foredoomed to failure in her career. It is an awful thing to say and it is still more terrible that it is true, but no-one who knows the life of the green room will dare deny it. All I can say is that I marvel at any mother who allows her daughter to take up the theatrical career and still more am I astonished that any man should calmly endure that his wife should become an actress, unaccompanied by himself. He must be either a fool or a knave. Nor do I see how a woman is to escape contamination in one form or another (...) It is

unwise in the last degree to expose a young girl to the inevitable consequences of a theatrical life!<sup>92</sup>

As Davis informs us, reactions to Scott's article came from the middle-class, affluent male representatives of the profession, whereas women kept a 'conspicuous silence' probably in an effort to keep out of a controversy which could have been detrimental to them in those years of struggle for respectability.<sup>93</sup> A year later, Scott was forced to discontinue his reviews in the *Telegraph*, but his attack still suggested that there was a link between actresses and public women and contributed to the actresses' difficulty in participating in the social rise of the actor.

An interesting insight into the life of actresses at the turn of the century is offered by the *Diary* of the actress Anne Ellerslie, published in 1885, which sheds light on the condition of rank-and-file-actresses.<sup>94</sup> It shows how lesser ladies at the turn of the century still suffered from inequalities under the actor-manager system and gained little advantage from the struggle for emancipation and from the more challenging roles of theatrical New Women.

The rather dismal picture offered by Ellerslie is in contrast with the considerable increase in actresses' salaries in the 1890s.<sup>95</sup> In the 1880s high pay for a leading lady ranged between £10 and £25 per week, whereas in the 1890s reasonable salaries were between £60 and £80. Rank-and-file actresses, however, could expect an average of £7 per week in the 1880s and up to £20 in the 1890s, but, as

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92. Here I quote from the reprint: Raymond Blathwayt, 'Does the Theatre Make for Good?' *An Interview with Mr. Clement Scott* (London: Hall, 1898), pp.3-4.

93. See Davis, *Actresses*, pp.95-97.

94. H.C.Shuttleworth, ed., *The Diary of an Actress, or Realities of Stage Life* (London: Griffith, 1885)

95. Figures are shown in Richards, p.105.



Allerslie pointed out, actresses often had to "make do with the lowest terms".

As the editor's preface suggests, the diary was meant to be a record of real life and a critique of the "vulgar notion of the stage immorality."<sup>96</sup> The dedication to Mrs Kendal, as a model of personal conduct, tends to reinforce the idea that the theatrical profession did not necessarily lead to perdition.

The *Diary* is an interesting travelogue which documents the actress's hectic life, intense travelling in the provinces and long, nerve-wracking, searches for engagements. As a lesser lady not born into the theatrical profession, Allerslie manages to give a vivid picture of stage life during the last decades of the nineteenth century and touches on many aspects of theatre organization and the position of the actress. She laments the contempt of her family for her profession and her difficult position as an educated, middle class woman and an outsider to theatrical families who is constantly confronted with the uncouthness of actor managers and fellow players who succeeded in demolishing her ideal of leading "an intellectual life among intellectual people" in the theatre. Furthermore, she criticizes the low standard of a repertoire which was "all pistols and sensation" and points to the shortcomings of the star system which allowed only for hasty rehearsals and required supporting actors to "go through the scenes in a very slipshod sort of fashion."<sup>97</sup>

Her last diary entry is a sort of afterword where she addresses her readers directly and aims at challenging the pervasive anti-theatrical prejudice against actresses:

What I wrote (...) may help to remove an unjust prejudice from the minds of those who think only of an

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96. Shuttleworth, p.9.

97. Shuttleworth, p.24.

actress as a frivolous and almost irresponsible being, without conscience, principle or self-respect, and incapable of understanding the serious duties and responsibilities of life (...) The temptations that surround our profession are in no way connected with it. They are outside, not inside, the theatre and are incidental to any profession or business, where a woman has to fight her way single-handed against the world, the flesh and the devil.<sup>98</sup>

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It would appear that the fin de siècle found no solution to the paradoxical situation of the actress. First, the issue of respectability was still a major obstacle for actresses, as Scott's attack shows and, what is more, as Allerslie lamented, lesser ladies had hardly been able to improve their status under the actor-manager system. Secondly, a new form of backlash was imposing the model of nervous, hysterical women on "advanced" actresses. Despite the steady advancement of professional women and the rise of theatrical New Women, at the turn of the century acting was still felt to be equal to the "oldest profession".

A way forward in order to improve the status and working conditions of actresses was envisaged by Lena Ashwell, whose contribution to the collection *Women Workers in Seven Professions*, could be read as an attack on the gendered order of the theatre. She hoped that it might be possible to re-think the unequal terms under which actresses were forced to work:

Men are also human, and if met frankly and straightforwardly in work (...) are as capable of honest, helpful good-fellowship as any woman. The work of the theatre which employs men and women on more or

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98. Shuttleworth, p.160.



less equal terms, is a splendid place to find out that humanity is not limited to sexual problems.<sup>99</sup>

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99. Ashwell, 'A Profession', p.309.

### 3. PANTHERS OF THE STAGE: INTERNATIONAL ACTRESSES ON THE VICTORIAN STAGE

#### (i) Enter the Star.

The position of the actress in the Victorian theatre as discussed in the previous chapter can be amplified by looking at foreign female stars who appeared on the Victorian stage. A critical look at foreign actresses in England will also shed light on the organization of the nineteenth-century English theatre and its changes throughout the century which, as I shall argue, favoured the rise of foreign stardom. This was by no means a phenomenon exclusive to England, as the theatrical touring circuit embraced several countries within as well as outside Europe. England was, however, a favourite destination with foreign stars who received considerable attention from the theatrical press and often fuelled debates on foreign and English theatre and different acting traditions.

It would appear that when English theatre moved towards more realistic modes of performance and production, thereby reducing the excessive theatricality of the early Victorian period, obsolete modes of performance were preserved through the medium of foreign stars. The histrionic art of the foreign stars who were pitted against each other on London stages and the visual and pictorial nature of their performances seemed to revive what Arrell has defined as the "palminess" of early nineteenth-century theatre which throughout the rest of the century would have otherwise survived only in the opera.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Douglas Arrell, 'Palmy Days at the Opera: Traditional Performance Style at Covent Garden in the 1890s', in *Bernhardt and the Theatre of Her Time*, ed. by Eric Salmon (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), pp.13-33 (p.16).



Throughout the Victorian era theatre organization in England underwent major changes<sup>2</sup>. Theatre activity differed greatly in organization between metropolitan companies based in London and provincial stock companies. The latter were primarily of local concern and presented a fairly varied repertoire each season, often changing play every night. The frequent change of bill was possible because actors were able to perform with hardly any rehearsal, in most cases only a brief walk-through of the play in order to fix entrances and stage positioning. This system was heavily reliant on the actor's familiarity with a standard repertoire of plays which often consisted of formula-written pieces, easy to perform for an experienced actor. Beginners were usually thrust on the stage with only a scanty knowledge of their lines and of the traditional "business" because this system did not favour adequate preparation or give much scope to the actor's own choices. All playing arrangements were the responsibility of the actor manager, who was often the leading actor of the company, or sometimes of the stage director. Under the stock company system, star acting became an increasingly common feature of the Victorian theatre. Stock companies tended to have leading players but not stars as such—a term that was reserved to visiting players who received an engagement for a limited series of performances with a provincial organization. A

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2. For a general introduction to the Victorian theatre see, among recent works James Woodfield, *Theatre in an Age of Transition* (London: Croom Helm, 1984); Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). The shift from the stock-company system to the long-run system is analyzed in Donald Mullin's 'Introduction' in *Victorian Actors and Actresses in Review: A Dictionary of representative British and American Actors and Actresses 1837-1901*, ed. and compiled by Donald Mullin (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983). Actors and their world are discussed in Michael Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor* (London: Croom Helm, 1978); Michael Sanderson, *From Irving to Olivier: A Social History of the Acting Profession in England 1880-1983* (London: Athlone Press, 1984); Tracy Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991). Acting styles and techniques are analyzed in George Taylor, *Players and Performances in the Victorian Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989). For a contemporary perspective see the numerous articles published in *The Theatre* between 1893-1895.



star engagement granted the resident company economic stability in that it helped to satisfy the audience's craving for novelty which could not always be adequately countered with the nightly change of bill.

The presence of a touring star would not normally affect the system of rehearsal and production of the resident company as the star tended to perform his/her parts in a traditional manner which could be easily understood and supported by the local cast.

Historians tend to agree on the fact that this system of star acting was operable thanks to the loose structure of the stock-system, which did not require extensive rehearsal and careful preparation of each production and, therefore, could be easily combined with the star's frequent travelling. Star engagements were beneficial for a provincial company not only because they secured steadier box office takings, but also because local actors tended to improve their standard in an effort to compete with a distinguished performer who also served as a model for them. However, the ever increasing presence of travelling stars slowly came to undermine the stock company system.

A first blow to the system came with the growing tendency of star performers to act in combination with a partner, first in a husband and wife partnership and then in a more extended group of a few metropolitan players. This would progressively reduce the support of the local cast which was eventually confined to walk-on parts. Taylor suggests that as early as the 1830s the stock company system was being threatened by the need for elaborate settings and a higher standard of acting in supporting roles, which were required by star actors when touring the provinces. He reports the case of the London star Macready who, on visiting Bristol in 1832, lamented the inadequacy of the local cast. However, the decline of stock theatres which marked a watershed in theatre organization, did not occur until the decade between 1864, the year of Henry Irving's first production of *Hamlet* with a Manchester stock company, and 1874, the year of



Irving's second *Hamlet* at the London Lyceum and with a fully rehearsed cast.<sup>3</sup>

The system of theatre productions which was to supersede stock theatres was based on a long run of plays produced by a permanent company. The difference between the two systems was huge and its effects on acting remarkable. For the purpose of this study it is important to assess the consequences of this shift on actors and acting styles and the ensuing changes in audience response, but it should be remembered that the introduction of the long run system implied a reassessment of every aspect of the production, from stage scenery to theatre building, from playwriting to stage management.<sup>4</sup>

The main features of the stock theatre were, according to Arrell, the presence of the prompter, the nightly change of bill, the use of poster playbills printed in blue colour, "historical" costumes as opposed to elaborate scenery and costumes, the efficient performance of minor parts and the prosy style and dialogue which became the main characteristics of the long run system.<sup>5</sup> It would appear that acting in the stock company was formulaic and highly conventional. It was of great importance for the stock actor to master a repertoire of poses and gestures that could effectively sustain hurriedly learnt lines and a barely-rehearsed part. Acting manuals in the first half of the century provided actors with illustrated poses corresponding to various feelings and passions, since great prominence was given to the outward and often over-

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3. Taylor, pp.3-5.

4. For a comprehensive analysis of the actual changes in theatre art following the development of the long run system see Taylor — especially his first chapter: 'Tradition and Change in the Victorian Theatre', pp.1-22— and George Rowell, *The Victorian Theatre: 1792-1914*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

5. See Arrell, p.15.

demonstrative expression of feelings.<sup>6</sup> This tendency limited individual characterization, and interplay between performers was often reduced to a minimum. As Taylor argues, the general effect produced by actors was that of statues against a painted background.

This theatre seemed to offer ample scope to the soloist nature of star acting. The breakdown of the system and the advent of the long run of a fully rehearsed play affected star acting insofar as the stress would fall more on ensemble play and move from the outward expression of feelings to psychological subtlety.

The long run system could be seen as part of a general movement in the Victorian age towards more complex modes of theatre production leading to the construction of the stage as a box set which differed greatly from the early Victorian stage. The most interesting example of the new theatre organization was offered by Squire Bancroft and Mary Wilton who managed their own theatre, the Prince of Wales's in London, from 1865 until well into the 1880s. Their opening play, *Society*, by Tom Robertson was a novelty in itself, drawing on contemporary bourgeois life, in carefully detailed settings and adopting colloquial style. It ran for almost one hundred and fifty nights and marked the beginning of a long-lasting cooperation between the Bancrofts and Robertson which gave a boost to a new theatre genre, known as "cup and saucer drama" which Brockett has defined as "a form of domestic realism."<sup>7</sup> The novelty of plays such as Robertson's, which required a different staging from the melodramas, farces and historical plays which formed the usual bill of stock theatres, had remarkable consequences on casting insofar as actors began to be engaged according to

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6. See for instance the description of the 'knees-bend stance' in Taylor, p.31. Among the most famous acting manuals is Henry Siddons, *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action* (London: 1807).

7. Oscar Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 4th edn (Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1982), p.509.



the specific requirements of each play rather than for a whole season.

The Bancrofts did not encourage star acting and often chose minor roles for themselves and went on provincial tours with the whole cast and their own costumes, props and scenery. Further major innovations involved the stage set up. There was a progressive decline of the apron stage and, consequently, the action was confined more and more to the area behind the proscenium arch, thereby producing the so-called "illusion of the fourth wall". This, in turn, led to an embellishment of the pit which soon became the area offering best seats. Following the success of the *Prince of Wales*, a relatively small theatre with just over six hundred seats, other small theatre halls were built which soon replaced the big theatre houses such as the Drury Lane which continued to host mainly opera along with the performances of foreign stars, especially in the summer season.

The impact of the Bancrofts' reform on the actor was undoubtedly great, as Taylor remarks:

If the romantic soloist could spout quite satisfactorily in front of a splendid backcloth, (...) a group of actors in the realistic environment of a box-set (...) had to plan their movements round the furniture and time their business to fit the effects.<sup>8</sup>

Under these conditions proper rehearsals seemed essential in order to raise the actor's awareness of the production as a whole. However, the attraction exerted on Victorian audiences by the player would remain unchanged throughout the age and audiences would be still drawn to the actor rather than the play — as the fact that they would still admire an aged actor essaying *Romeo* because the superiority

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<sup>8</sup>. Taylor, p.22.

of his skill compensated for the lack of physical verisimilitude seems to prove. In a theatre where star acting had been given a boost before being jeopardized by ensemble playing, it is not surprising that foreign stars came to enjoy an increasing popularity. Foreign, non-English-speaking players helped to renew the vitality of romantic acting which would otherwise have withered more rapidly<sup>9</sup>.

Auerbach has more provocatively pointed out that the reform of the stage in the Victorian age, as epitomized by the Bancrofts/Robertson venture, served to banish from the theatre "the mutable and exotic" and that "the Victorians' approval of the Bancrofts' cosy pseudo-home purged from the Victorian theatre its alluring alienating theatricality."<sup>10</sup>

## (ii) The Gilded Stage

Though rigid periodization can often appear arbitrary and the Victorian age can hardly be viewed as a self-contained unity, it is nonetheless true that the beginning of Queen Victoria's age marked the emergence and flourishing of international stardom on the English stage. The process can be said to have been initiated by the first London tour of the French actress Rachel in 1841 and have progressively waned in the first decades of the twentieth century, the London performances of Sada Yacco and the Japanese players at the beginning of the twentieth century being a convenient endpoint. Rachel's successful tour set the standard for the continual discussion and evaluation of foreign stars throughout the Victorian age, whereas Sada Yacco introduced

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9. Mullin, 'Introduction', pp.xxviii-xxxii.

10. Nina Auerbach, 'Victorian Players and Sages', in *The Performance of Power* ed. by Sue Ellen Case and Janelle Reinelt (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), pp.183-198 (pp.192-193).



a further element of foreignness other than the use of a foreign tongue, insofar as she confronted late Victorian audiences with the tradition and conventions of Oriental theatre. The transformations of the theatre scene previously discussed could account for the opening up of the Victorian stage to foreign stars but a crucial factor is also to be found in what Knepler has defined as the 'gilded stage' seen as a reflection of the gilded age.

Knepler argues that:

[That] Rachel became an international actress — in fact, the international actress — was not due to the superiority of her talent over all others, past and present, however great her talent was. She achieved that rank because the world was ready to give it to her, because she was part of the new order of the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

The new order which is mentioned here was essentially brought about by considerable technological improvements and industrial development throughout the century which created a climate of optimism. The spirit of the age of progress and advancement was symbolized by the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in London in 1851, followed four years later by the Great Exhibition in Paris, which were also meant to be cultural showcases. International theatre companies were invited to perform during the exhibitions, an interesting example being offered by the overwhelming success of the Royal Sardinian Company and its leading lady Adelaide

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11. Henry Knepler, *The Gilded Stage* (London: Constable, 1968), p.37. Knepler follows the international careers of Rachel, Ristori, Bernhardt and Duse and places great emphasis on their different acting styles and how foreign audiences viewed and compared them. Frequent reference to the historical background places the international careers of the four stars in a broad cultural context and succeeds in describing the international ambience in the nineteenth century which favoured their success in foreign countries. Today this book comes across, however, as dated and fairly limited especially on account of Knepler's almost total neglect of other international actresses.

Ristori at the Paris exhibition. The belief in the steady progress of the civilized world favoured an "optimistic internationalism" among the upper middle class which was enjoying increasing wealth and power and was apt to celebrate international stars as the fulfillment of true progress. The new middle class, a product of the Industrial Revolution, formed a vast new audience which strongly believed in the mythology of progress and the myth of the self-made man. Therefore, the theatre could be easily transformed into an arena, with the international actresses as 'lionesses of that circus.'<sup>12</sup>

To their barnstorming activity major technological advancement such as rail and steamship travel were crucial. It should also be pointed out that by the time the first international actresses appeared, the social status of actors was changing, and although age-old prejudices against them did not die easily,

In general performers knew that they needed no longer to wear the livery of a prince or nobleman, and the fruits of their labour were becoming very tangible and large.<sup>13</sup>

Duvignaud, in his sociological analysis of the actor's role in society has pointed to the great change in status and function experienced by actors in what he defines as "liberal society."<sup>14</sup> In this society actors asserted, on the one hand, their individuality exemplified in the full

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12. Knepler, pp.200-201.

13. Knepler, p.104.

14. Jean Duvignaud, *L'Acteur, Esquisse d'une sociologie du comédien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965). See in particular Chapter II: *Le rôle de l'acteur dans les sociétés libérales*. The changing role of actors in society is here discussed on the basis of a tripartite model of society: monarchic (Renaissance to the eighteenth century), liberal (eighteenth and nineteenth century), contemporary (late-nineteenth to the twentieth century).



listing of their names on the poster playbill from 1810 onwards, but, on the other, engaged in a relationship of dependence with their audience who became their new patron. The actor's status was further transformed during the industrial age by a growing concern with the availability of goods and commodities. The growing tendency towards commodification affected actors who began to be seen as objects of consumption, whose exceptional lives could be consumed by their public, as manifested by the surge of actors' biographies in the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> This argument is endorsed by Knepler when he states that the habit of inviting great actors and actresses to banquets and various social events enhanced their status as objects of "conspicuous consumption."<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it would appear that the growth of a leisure-seeking mass audience which saw in the theatre a means of displaying their newly acquired wealth, provided the social framework for the rise of international stars.

A contemporary critic such as George Henry Lewes also saw how the myth of extraordinary people fuelled by the new theatregoing public who "flocked" to the theatre "as it never flocked in what were called the palmy days of the drama" played to the advantage of the foreign star:

The proof of this eagerness to welcome any exceptional talent is seen in the success of Fechter and Ristori.<sup>17</sup>

The star-studded "gilded stage" (especially if it could boast foreign stars) suited the age of conspicuous consumption:

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15. See Duvignaud, pp.141-142.

16. Knepler, p.107.

17. George Henry Lewes, *On Actors and the Art of Acting* (London: Smith and Elder, 1875), p.144.

Into this heady atmosphere of ruthlessness mixed with moral preachments and sentimentality came the great actors and actresses, samples both of the myth of success and the lure of the forbidden fruit, examples, as well as objects of conspicuous consumption. Their rise from obscurity to fame paralleled the rags-to-riches of the millionaire (...) and served the age both as an example of what to be, and in moral terms, of what not to be.<sup>18</sup>

The "atmosphere of ruthlessness" encouraged competition between star actors who aimed at securing for themselves "a room at the top" in the theatre world. The room at the top could hold very few major stars in each generation, so that, as Knepler has it, though more foreign stars appeared on the London stage in the nineteenth century an unrivalled dominion was exercised first by Rachel and Ristori in the 1840s to 1860s, who formed the first generation of international stars, and then by the second generation of Bernhardt and Duse, whose climactic encounters enlivened the theatre scene in the 1890s. They appeared to be the only foreign actresses who were able "to transcend the limitations of language and culture" and were aided by the fact that:

French was the language of culture and Italian the language of opera, both of them more euphonious to foreign ears than German or English, both in vogue as cultural assets with the middle class, even if one only pretended to know them.<sup>19</sup>

A major role in fostering the success of foreign performers was played by Queen Victoria herself, as a

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18. Knepler, p.106.

19. Knepler, pp.4-5.



consequence of her genuine interest in theatre and her intense theatregoing. Rachel, Ristori and Duse were all invited to perform at Windsor Castle in front of the Royal Family and the Queen's interest in foreign performers was so great, especially at the time when "Jenny Lind was at her Majesty's and Rachel at the St. James's", that fashionable society was drawn to these "foreign shrines in unprecedented numbers" and even produced a certain resentment in the English theatrical profession.<sup>20</sup>

It could be argued that the laissez-faire attitude applied to theatre in the Victorian age created the conditions of stardom seen as a specific product of a society geared towards conspicuous consumption. In his analysis of stardom, Dyer lists a set of pre-conditions which create the basis for its production.<sup>21</sup> Though Dyer's study applies to film stars and to the Hollywood industry, it can nonetheless throw light on the mid-nineteenth-century social scene which served as a springboard for the rise to stardom of foreign actresses. In his analysis three main conditions stand out as crucial to the production of stardom: the social scene, the role of forces of production and consumption in shaping stardom and stars, the ideological function of the star phenomenon.<sup>22</sup> Major factors favouring stardom seemed to be at work in the Victorian age

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20. See George Rowell, *Queen Victoria Goes to the Theatre* (London: Elek, 1978), pp.44-45.

21. Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1979).

22. Dyer's work combines semiology and sociology and introduces the notion of the star as text, produced across a range of media and cultural practices. The sociological factors favouring the star phenomenon are explained by drawing on the works of Alberoni and King on the star industry. Alberoni puts forward a series of basic conditions favouring stardom, such as a state of law, an efficient bureaucracy, a structured social system— all three factors ensuring the delimitation of social roles whereby stars are not a threat— a large scale society, economic development above subsistence, social mobility. For King a major precondition is determined by the production of surplus whereby commodities are available in excess of basic needs. See Dyer, *Stars*, pp.7-8.

along with an increasing concern with the publicity of newly manufactured goods which strikes us as a main feature of the star industry insofar as stars are manufactured through extensive build-up publicity. Stokes refers to the role of publicity in the success of Helena Modjeska's London tours when it was possible to buy souvenirs in the shape of heartseases following her successful performance in the play *Heartsease*.<sup>23</sup>

The role of publicity in forging the star's image was often pointed out by contemporary critics especially with reference to Bernhardt. The visit of the Comédie Française to London in 1879, introducing Sarah Bernhardt to the London stage, was "the most noteworthy event (...) for many a long year in the theatrical annals of London."<sup>24</sup> A major part in the success of the company was played by Bernhardt herself, whose performance invited "inevitable comparison" with Rachel. According to Arnold, Bernhardt possessed "all the charming gifts of temperament and quick intelligence, passion, nervous mobility, grace, smile, voice, charm." She was not free from the "perils of mannerism", however, and lacked the high intellectual power of Rachel:

It was here that Rachel was so great; she began (...) almost where Mlle Bernhardt ends.<sup>25</sup>

Archer and James, on the other hand, tended to emphasize Bernhardt's ability in promoting her image which made her stand out from the group of French players. Archer

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23. John Stokes, 'Helena Modjeska in England', *Women and Theatre. Occasional Papers*, 1 (1992), 19-37 (p.28). I shall discuss the promotion of foreign stars by means of a carefully planned publicity campaign with reference to Adelaide Ristori in the following chapter.

24. Henry James, *The Scenic Art: Notes on Acting and the Drama. 1872-1901*, ed. by Allan Wade (London: Hart-Davis, 1949), p.125.

25. Matthew Arnold, 'The French Play in London', *Nineteenth Century*, 8 (1879), 228-143 (p.230).



maintained that the 1879 London tour had given a great boost to Bernhardt as an international star, especially inasmuch as it made her discover the "pecuniary potentiality of star-worshipping Anglo-Saxondom" to the extent that she became a "self-centred and independent money-getting machine."<sup>26</sup> James emphasized how Bernhardt's success had been the "most gratifying incident of the visit of the Comédie", but only to a moderate extent an artistic success and argued that the extraordinary vogue of Bernhardt was primarily a reflection of her being a celebrity:

The trade of a celebrity, pure and simple, had been invented, I think, before she came to London; if it had not been, it is certain she would have discovered it. She has in a supreme degree what the French call the *génie de la réclame*—the advertising genius; she may indeed be called the muse of the newspaper (...) I strongly suspect that she will find a triumphant career in the Western world. She is too American not to succeed in America. The people who have brought to the highest development the arts and graces of publicity will recognize a kindred spirit in a figure so admirably apted for conspicuity.<sup>27</sup>

The appeal of "conspicuity" exerted by Bernhardt and other international actresses was a key element in their striving towards "showmanship", as Findlater puts it.<sup>28</sup> It is a fact that most foreign actresses from Rachel to Duse, gave proof of their ability in promoting themselves and even in managing their own companies, "without answering to any

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26. William Archer, 'A Well-Graced Actress', *National Review*, 7 (1886), 770-780 (p.772).

27. James, pp.128-129.

28. Richard Findlater, 'Bernhardt and the English Player Queens: A Venture into Comparative Mythology', in Salmon, ed., pp.91-109 (p.95).

ringmaster", unlike most English actresses who acted in a conjugal partnership.<sup>29</sup> Their entrepreneurial ability could to an extent have contributed towards their status as iconic women.

Dyer suggests that the image of the star is not two-dimensional but rather a "configuration of visual, verbal and aural signs."<sup>30</sup> In the definition of the image of nineteenth-century theatre stars who performed before foreign audiences in a foreign language, the visual and aural aspects seem to be fundamental. Findlater points to the

amiable disposition of London playgoers to find actresses far more significant, oracular and disturbing if they were acting in a language that the majority of the audience did not understand.<sup>31</sup>

He refers to "the mesmeristic powers of Bernhardt" — but I would argue that his assumption can suitably apply to other foreign performers — "whose hypnosis worked all the better because the abracadabra invocations were in a language that many people could not understand."<sup>32</sup>

If, on the one hand, acting in a foreign language could add to their charm, on the other it could notably hamper the production of a verbally meaningful performance. Hence the great allure of their performances as spectacle. Reviews of their performances, as I shall show in more detail in the chapters on Ristori and Duse, often pointed to the grace of their voices and the variety of their tones, in an effort to counterbalance the difficulty of having to critically

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29. Findlater, 'Bernhardt', p.95.

30. Dyer, p.39.

31. Findlater, 'Bernhardt', p.108.

32. Findlater, 'Bernhardt', p.108.



appreciate a performance in a foreign language. Therefore the critical discourse on them tended to draw on the one usually applied to opera singers.

There was undoubtedly a snobbish attitude implied on the side of audience and critics as Agate remarked, when he pointed to "the ecstasy of the highbrows who understood Italian, and the even greater extravagance of those who did not."<sup>33</sup> Max Beerbohm bitterly commented on the great enthusiasm aroused by performances in a foreign language with reference to Duse's theatre season:

Eecostoetchiayoomahniacevahrachellopestibahntamahnta fahnta.... Shall I go on? No? You do not catch my meaning when I write this? I am to express myself, please, in plain English? If I wrote the whole of my article as I have written the beginning of it, you would, actually, refuse to read it? I am astonished. The chances are that you do not speak Italian, do not understand Italian when it is spoken(...) Italian spoken from the stage of a theatre produces for you no more than the empty, though rather pretty effect that it produces for me, and which I have tried to suggest phonetically in print.<sup>34</sup>

The operatic attitude towards actresses which was based on the pervasive connection between music and theatre in the nineteenth century may have "served the international actress to great advantage" because it allowed them to equal the status of operatic *primadonnas*.<sup>35</sup> However, I would argue that their acquired status as *primadonnas*, much as it was necessary in order to achieve success, nonetheless displaced their role as performers in spoken drama and served to

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33. Quoted in Knepler, p.232.

34. Quoted in Knepler, p.232.

35. Knepler, p.231.

stress the element of sheer spectacle in their performances and call attention, as we said in the previous chapter, to their to-be-looked-at-ness.

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Contemporary discourse on foreign stars often tended to draw comparison between the English theatre and foreign stage traditions and was deployed by critics as a means to highlight the pitfalls of the "gilded stage".

In his 1879 essay on the Comédie Française in London Arnold advocated that the English theatre was in deep need of reorganization, since no "drama in the modern sense" was being produced and, what was more, the lack of a strong endowed theatre had considerably hampered the development of theatre, which had fallen into a very chaotic condition.<sup>36</sup> However, the lamentable state of the theatre did not prevent theatregoers from being attracted to it in ever increasing numbers following the new middle classes' discovery of the appeal of theatregoing. Therefore, as the mightiest means to *épater la bourgeoisie*, Arnold argues, "the theatre is irresistible". To "the lack of purpose, dignity and organization of the English theatre", Arnold opposed the model system of the Comédie Française, which seemed to be admirable in organization, and suggested that their London performances should show to English audiences what could be gained by organizing the theatre, as Sarah Bernhardt, "in her most caressing tones" would say to the Londoners: "The theatre is irresistible; organize the theatre."<sup>37</sup>

The issue of the defective organization of English theatre was also tackled by Archer who in his essay "A well-graced actress" pointed to differences between trained

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36. Arnold, p.242.

37. Arnold, pp.240-243.



and untrained acting; the former widely established in France and producing striking results as exemplified by Bernhardt's excellent performances, the latter still in favour among English players. Archer maintained that, though she was far from being a great actress, due to "the narrow limits of her genius and the artificiality of her talent", Bernhardt had nonetheless a complete mastery of techniques that allowed her to stand out as "queen of the modern stage":

She often fails in inspiration, but seldom in accomplishment. In one word, she is a thoroughly trained actress.<sup>38</sup>

Unlike Bernhardt, English actresses received no regular training and tended to follow "the go as you please system", which in Archer's opinion played greatly to their disadvantage. He put forward the case of Mrs Kendal, whom he deemed to be an accomplished actress but still "showing symptoms of defective training" and that of Ellen Terry who, much as she was endowed with "something of the exotic witchery of Bernhardt", along with "a very considerable dramatic instinct", would nonetheless reveal the shortcomings of an irregular training and often fall to the level of "the graceful amateur":

She, like Madame Bernhardt, ekes out her genius with artifice; but her artifices are home-made, naive and monotonous.<sup>39</sup>

The inadequacy of the English theatre compared to the French or German was also felt by James who, echoing Archer, found major faults with English actors due to their lack of

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38. Archer, 'Well-Graced..', p.775.

39. Archer, 'Well-Graced..', pp.776-779.

training.<sup>40</sup> In his view, actresses were in the weakest position and charged with major faults such as "a want of freshness, of brightness, of elegance, of art."<sup>41</sup> Harsh as he might have been in his judgement, James seemed however to acknowledge that the dullness of English actresses was also the result of the lack of important, engaging roles for women on the English stage. This seemed to account for the success of a foreign actress like Modjeska who was the attraction of the hour in 1880, notwithstanding the poor quality of the roles she offered: Marguerite Gautier in a "dismal translation" and a "business-like" version of *Mary Stuart*. However, Modjeska's "quiet felicities" shone out compared to the "absolute horseplay" of English actresses.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, in James' view, the unequalled success in the 1880s of Modjeska, a Polish actress who performed in a German play, should serve as a reminder of the bleakness of the English stage.

The lack of engaging roles for English actresses could be ascribed, on the one hand, to the severe control of censorship and, on the other, to the actresses' efforts to set a high-minded tradition in the recognized theatre which found two outstanding representatives in Helena Faucit and Madge Kendal. Their striving towards respectability inevitably narrowed the scope of their repertoire, especially if this was compared to the wide-ranging repertoire of foreign actresses. The appeal of the foreign actress relied heavily on their larger-than-life portrayals and their "emotional, gesticulatory, and passionately demonstrative" body language which was usually dismissed as being "common and foreign", but nonetheless, enjoyed as exotic.<sup>43</sup>

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40. James, p.146.

41. James, p.150.

42. James, p.161.

43. Findlater, 'Bernhardt', pp.95-96.



In the eyes of contemporary critics, the attraction of foreign stars may have also been enhanced by their acting "as much as possible" compared to the increasing move towards "acting as little as possible", the former standing for romantic, over-demonstrative acting, the latter for the nuanced, prosy acting of the Bancroft school.<sup>44</sup> This aspect is tackled by Lewes who acknowledged the lure of "the art of good mob acting, charming the eye and stunning the ear"<sup>45</sup> which, however, should not prevent the audience from discriminating between good and bad acting. In his analysis of the foreign actors Fechter, Ristori and Colas, Lewes pointed to the widespread mistake of considering foreign actors more fresh and original than the English, simply because they did not seem to possess the "conventionalisms" of the English stage. In his view, foreign actors were not immune from the conventionalisms of their own tradition and, therefore, they should be looked up to as models only if they possessed real genius and managed to "display the futility of conventionalisms and teach the actor to rely on sincerity of expression."<sup>46</sup> These assumptions led him to express harsh comments on Stella Colas whose success was heavily dependent on her good looks and her being a French woman, along with the "deplorable condition of decline" of the English stage:

If Mlle Stella Colas finds easy admirers, it is because (...) in the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed is king.<sup>47</sup>

It would appear that foreign actresses received great attention from London critics less on account of their own

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44. James, p.135.

45. Lewes, p.152.

46. Lewes, p.144.

47. Lewes, p.153.

art, than on the comparison they provided with English actresses and the English stage, or at least critics used them in this way so as to comment on the English stage. But the average member of the audience may have seen it differently. Foreign stars were often perceived to be more accomplished than English actresses and capable of shining in a more challenging repertoire, as was often pointed out by James and Archer, for example, but it appears that their success relied heavily on their ability to strike the 'exotic' or 'southern' note.

### (iii) International Actresses from Rachel to Sada Yacco

It is difficult to make out the common features of nineteenth-century international theatre stars and provide a comprehensive record of them. Scholars who have dealt with this subject do not seem to agree as to what criteria should be followed in order to describe actors performing in foreign countries as international.

In his dictionary of *Victorian Actors and Actresses*, Mullin gives the title of international actresses to four performers only: Adelaide Ristori, Fanny Janauschek, Helena Modjeska and Eleonora Duse. Strangely enough, French actresses like Rachel, Sarah Bernhardt and Gabrielle Réjane who frequently appeared on the London stage do not feature in his list.

Knepler, as mentioned earlier, considers only the Italian and the French to be potentially truly international, though eventually only Rachel, Ristori, Bernhardt and Duse managed to reach the top:

Mlle George and Mlle Déjazet, born in the eighteenth century, had been too early for consistent international careers(...) and could not compete with Rachel. Rachel's crown might have fallen to Aimée Desclée (...) but Desclée was indolent and not sure of herself (...) Déjazet was too early, and Desclée too



lazy. Réjane, on the other hand, was too late (...) when she entered the international arena, the top position was firmly committed. Sarah Bernhardt became an international star in the early 1880s, near the end of Ristori's career. For nearly a decade she remained in solitary eminence, until the appearance of the second Italian: Eleonora Duse.<sup>48</sup>

Other great actresses, such as the Dutch Mann and the Bohemian born German-speaking Fanny Janauschek, suffered from the "bar of the language", which prevented Janauschek from becoming a star in America until she started to perform her entire repertoire in English. A special place was taken up by Polish born Modjeska who, despite the limitations of her language, was favourably compared with the great French actresses, after her guest performance at the Comédie Française in the role of *Iphigénie*. However, "an actress who played in Polish, or in French with an accent, could not make her way internationally" and even after her long-lasting success in America where she performed in English, she did not manage to enjoy the same success as Bernhardt and Duse did, mainly on account of the little international appeal of performances in Polish or English.<sup>49</sup>

Knepler's neglect of non-French and non-Italian stars, which may have served the purpose of creating a canon in the history of international performers needs, however, to be redressed, on account of the many international stars who played in England in the nineteenth century. It is a fact that the advantage of being able to perform in either French or Italian, which was considered to be a decisive feature in allowing access to an international career, did not prevent

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48. Knepler, p.116.

49. Knepler, pp.117-118.

actresses whose native tongue was neither French nor Italian from achieving success on the Victorian stage.

The wave of foreign performers was remarkable and the task of tracing them all would be long and deserve a study in its own right. Far from claiming exhaustiveness, I shall look at those actresses who were most successful during their English tours and offer themselves for comparative analysis. Stokes suggests that one could group these actresses under the caption of the "Great European Performer", pioneered by Rachel in the 1840s, who had also presented a standard repertoire which she bequeathed to later actresses. I shall suggest a chronology of European performers and divide them into three generations according to two main aspects: acting styles and repertoire. The first generation, whose main representatives were Rachel and Ristori, adopted a so-called grand manner style, cast in the romantic mould which borrowed modes from operatic *primadonnas*. The repertoire consisted of mainly historical dramas. The second generation, whose most outstanding representative was Modjeska, though still presenting the modes and repertoire typical of the grand manner, tried to move beyond it by introducing in their repertoire modern plays which called for different acting styles. The third generation of foreign stars, spearheaded by Aimée Desclée and best represented by Eleonora Duse, achieved success in the fin de siècle and presented audiences with a style which would fit the representation of modern heroines in modern plays.

The question regarding the repertoire of the foreign actress is an interesting one. Stokes maintains that the heroines interpreted by foreign actresses tended to be passionate women, with death looming over their lives.<sup>50</sup> The similarity of the repertoire was demanded by audiences who liked to see stars engaged in the same roles. This attitude of nineteenth-century playgoers could explain, for instance,

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50. Stokes, 'Modjeska', p.19.



the recurring presence of a role like Scribe and Legouv e's *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, based on the life of the eponymous eighteenth-century actress, and originally written for Rachel but essayed by most foreign actresses at different times. The Bernhardt-Duse rivalry in the 1890s offered an insight into different acting styles and fuelled comparison, the peak being reached in May 1895 with three different London productions of Sudermann's *Magda*, one in French, one in Italian and the third in German. If similarities in repertoire could allow for the creation of an easily stereotyped metatype, differences should not be overlooked that could emphasize the distinctive features of individual performers and convey different projections of womanhood on stage.

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Rachel had made her debut in 1837 when "classical tragedy was not dying but dead",<sup>51</sup> ousted by nascent Romantic drama. Agate argues that her only concern with the new movement was "to turn her back on it", just as Irving and Terry turned their backs on the New Drama and devoted themselves to reviving Shakespeare. Therefore Rachel's international repertoire consisted essentially of plays by Corneille and Racine, with the exception of Schiller's *Mary Stuart*, rewritten by Lebrun, and a few contemporary plays. Ristori's repertoire included native historical dramas and comedies after Goldoni, as well as translations of major foreign plays<sup>52</sup>. The repertoires of the two actresses were therefore different, though some of Ristori's roles, like for instance Alfieri's *Mirra*, were cast in the classical

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51. James Agate, *Rachel* (London: Howe, 1928), p.9.

52. Ristori's commitment to the patriotic cause shaped her international repertoire in that she often performed the historical plays of her countrymen Alfieri, Marenco and Pellico to foreign audiences.

mould and could invite comparison with *Phèdre*, one of Rachel's major roles. A more direct comparison between the two actresses could be offered by their performances in *Mary Stuart*. Ristori's heroine, in the adaptation by Maffei, was a romantic, majestic heroine, whereas Rachel's tended to be a compromise between the Romantic and the classical. Of the two, Ristori's Romantic style seemed to be most in favour with mid-nineteenth-century audiences, also on account of its alleged "naturalness", which made Rachel's classical style appear obsolete. As Knepler explains, Ristori's "coloured naturalness" succeeded in giving a vivid expression to the larger-than-life situations portrayed in nineteenth-century plays:

In the typical nineteenth-century play, the characters, hardly ever common, meet up against situations most men and women mercifully never encounter in their lives: conscious choices of life and death; wild, irrepressible urges leading to disaster. The reactions required of the actor may be natural — but it is the naturalness of man under extreme stress, in the throes of agony. That realm of nature was Ristori's (...) her manifestations of ferocity, the wild anguish of remorse, and the delirium of desolation were tremendous. [She] heightened these effects as much as she could.<sup>53</sup>

Her impressive, larger-than-life style was imitated by other actresses. The first generation of international actresses spearheaded by Rachel and Ristori was cast in the grand manner style.<sup>54</sup> Another representative of the first generation was Fanny Janauschek who, after an early career at the Prague Royal Theatre, achieved success on the German

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53. Knepler, p.74.

54. Features of grand-manner acting will be discussed in the chapter on Ristori.



stage with a typically romantic repertoire whose mainstays were *Mary Stuart*, *Lady Macbeth*, *Medea*, *Iphigénie*, *Adrienne Lecouvreur*. *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* describes her as an epigonic figure in the grand tragic style and *The Cambridge Guide* points out her statuesque figure, emotional power, vibrant and controlled voice. A turning point in her international career was achieved in 1867 in New York when she performed *Medea* in German supported by an English-speaking cast. In the 1870s she turned her whole repertoire into English and toured England for the first time in 1876. Reviewers pointed to her "stagey acting, aiming at the picturesque and the dramatic. (...) Her forte appears to be the passionate rather than the dramatic."<sup>55</sup> As *Mary Stuart*, she showed "little pathos and some mannerism, and intense rather than sympathetic acting."<sup>56</sup> Her English tour was not a great success, much to the regret of the press:

It is a discouraging reflection that acting so unrivalled as this has been exhibited in London with so conspicuous a want of success, that the actress has not even been able to play for the short period of twelve nights originally assigned her."<sup>57</sup>

It could be argued that by 1876 the appeal of tragic roles and grand manner acting was already in decline, therefore Janauschek failed where Rachel and Ristori had succeeded a few decades earlier.

A special case was that of two American-born actresses, who made a reputation for themselves in England, Charlotte Cushman and Kate Bateman. Cushman, originally trained as an opera singer, made her English debut in 1845 where she

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55. 'Janauscheck as *Medea*', *Athenaeum*, 6 May 1876.

56. *Athenaeum*, 13 May 1876.

57. *Athenaeum*, 13 May 1876.

toured regularly until 1855. Her major interpretations were Lady Macbeth, Mary Stuart, Rosalind, Bianca in Milliman's *Fazio*. Due to her "somewhat masculine cast of countenance", as *The Oxford Companion* points out, she also played a number of male roles. Whether she and Bateman should be ranked among foreign actresses is open to debate. Mullin considers Cushman to be an "American actress", maybe on account of her career in the States prior to her English tours, whereas Bateman is described as "American-born English actress", on account of her almost entirely English career.<sup>58</sup> In the critics' view, however, they could not be considered to be thoroughly English actresses. When Cushman appeared on the London stage reviewers pointed to her "native roughness", and considered her performance to have been "daring":

In this jaded city, a London that had already seen in Mrs Siddons and scores of other performers the best of all possible acting, what could she offer them now, except a quaint, American accent and a kind of naive eagerness?<sup>59</sup>

However, she was also praised for her "carefully created points", one of the main features of grand style acting, and for "her elaborate pauses and freezings."<sup>60</sup> As Leach suggests, Cushman's native roughness was perceived to be a foil to the ladylikeness of English actresses, but at the same time the difference between them and Cushman was like "a wide and impassable gulf, the gulf which divides talent and genius."<sup>61</sup>

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58. See Mullin, p.141 and p.54.

59. Quoted in Joseph Leach, *Bright Particular Star: The Life and Times of Charlotte Cushman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p.143.

60. Quoted in Leach, p.150.

61. Leach, p.150.



Born into a theatrical family of New York, Kate Bateman made a significant debut in London in 1863 as Leah, a role associated with Ristori. The *Saturday Review* found faults with her pronunciation of English "not altogether free from the Transatlantic accent", but praised her statuesque style:

Having first made an impression on her audience by her picturesque aspect, she rivets their attention when they least expect it by the intensity with which she expresses her emotions. Her poses (...) are extremely striking; and the peculiar costume which heightens their effect shows that the idea of forming part of an effective tableau has been uppermost in the young artist's mind.<sup>62</sup>

Here, reference to the intensity of emotions, striking poses and effective tableaux are clearly reminiscent of Ristori's style. Bateman also seemed to follow Ristori so far as her choice of repertoire went. Her other major roles were, in fact, Bianca in *Fazio* and *Medea*. As *Medea*, she gave perhaps a "rather too violent impersonation (...)" but the part was admirably suited to her powers.<sup>63</sup> However, not all critics agreed on the success of Bateman's impersonation and, as Aston suggests, many pointed to the difficulty of "working on the English stage with the performance of an Italian actress for a blueprint" and found a major fault in her "straining after the grand style."<sup>64</sup> Therefore one could suggest that she strove to be an international actress, but did not wholly succeed.

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62. *Saturday Review*, 10 October 1863.

63. *Examiner*, 13 July 1872.

64. Elaine Aston, 'Ristori's *Medea* and Her Nineteenth-Century Successors', *Women and Theatre. Occasional Papers*, 1 (1992), 38-47 (p.45).

The grand style was also revived by the American Genevieve Ward, probably Ristori's closest follower, who having played the role of a French adventuress in a production of *Forget-me-not* at the Lyceum in 1879, was soon identified with "outcast roles and continental acting styles."<sup>65</sup> Like Cushman she had trained as an opera singer, which probably accounts for her tendency to follow the tragic grand style. James described her as the most interesting actress in London in the 1880 season, however he acknowledged that she never managed to achieve a great success, notwithstanding her finished acting, a failure which he put down to "an insufficient demand for her peculiar qualities."<sup>66</sup> She also established a wider international reputation by acting in French both in Paris and London, which as Scott remarked, was quite unusual for an English-speaking actress.<sup>67</sup> Although her repertoire consisted mainly of romantic tragic roles, she also appeared in modern plays, such as Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* where she played the role of Gunhild. Shaw acknowledged the difficulty of this character and did not approve of Ward's interpretation as she did not seem to have found the "appropriate temperament":

The truth is, her tragic style, derived from Ristori, was not made for Ibsen. On the other hand, her conversational style, admirably natural and quite free from the Mesopotamian solemnity with which some of her colleagues delivered the words of the master, was genuinely dramatic.<sup>68</sup>

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65. Aston, 'Medea', p.45.

66. James, p.154.

67. Clement Scott, *The Drama of Yesterday and Today*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1899), II, pp.159-160.

68. George Bernard Shaw, *Our Theatres in the Nineties*, 3 vols (London: Constable: 1932), III, pp.128-129.



These actresses, who adopted a distinctive grand manner style which suited the representation of tragic heroines and tended to project images of idealized womanhood, due to their "native roughness" would appear to be different from the ladylike image associated with English actresses. Furthermore, it may be at this stage that the link between international actresses and operatic *primadonnas* was felt to be very strong, also on account of numerous operatic versions of the plays in the repertoires of these international actresses, such as Verdi's *Macbeth*, a major vehicle for operatic *primadonnas* on the international stage.

In the late 1870s the grand manner style was progressively losing its grip on English audiences and the fact that international actresses would lean towards a repertoire different from that based on the portrayal of tragic heroines, as exemplified by Ward's choice of a "woman with a past" and an Ibsen role, may have speeded up the process towards a new acting style.

A significant step towards the renewal of the international actress's repertoire was made by Helena Modjeska, who could be said to stand out as a transitional figure between the generation of Ristori and Rachel and that of Duse and Bernhardt.

*The Oxford Companion* suggests that, however wide her repertoire might have been, ranging from classical tragedy to contemporary plays in Sardou's style, Modjeska was at her best in tragic or strongly emotional parts. *The Cambridge Guide* ascribes her fame mainly to Shakespearean roles and her impersonation of *Adrienne Lecouvreur*. As she argued in her *Memoirs*, she soon felt the appeal of performing in a foreign language and presented Shakespearean roles in German during her engagement with a Cracow stock-company.<sup>69</sup> However, she seemed aware that at the time of her first major

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69. Helena Modjeska, *Memoirs and Impressions: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1910), p.107.

engagements in Warsaw it would have been too demanding for her to perform in a foreign language, despite the fact that Polish was too little known to be used outside Poland. Therefore, her international career would appear to have been delayed by her not being able to act in one of the recognized international languages. There was a turning point in the 1870s when she emigrated to the States and took up studying her roles in English, leading to a New York debut with *Adrienne Lecouvreur* in 1877. In her *Memoirs* she refers to the difficulty of performing in a foreign language and having to render "all the necessary lights and shades, when one is hampered by the lack of familiarity both with the foreign words and pronunciation."<sup>70</sup>

On her London debut in 1880, where she performed in English and was supported by a specially organized company, her foreign accent was perceived to be "an unharmonious note in a concert of music"<sup>71</sup> and the difference between her acting style and that of her English cast appeared to be huge:

I have seen no actress upon the English stage so expert as Madame Modjeska in strengthening and enriching her histrionic portrait-painting by means of minute touches, or so curiously practiced in the personal details and individual finesse of the business of the scene. She has a foreigner's restlessness and variety of gesture - that free movement of the wrists and fingers which is denied to our native players generally (...) her ways are not the ways of her playfellows who, let it be conceded, do not lack capacity; she seems remitted to a portion

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70. Modjeska, p.373.

71. Dutton Cook, *Nights at the Play* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1883), p.410.



of isolation, because of the discrepancies between her histrionic manner and theirs.<sup>72</sup>

Modjeska's acting style seemed to move away from the traditional grand manner as she pointed out in her memoirs where she criticized some key elements of grand manner acting such as the tendency to deliver crucial parts by the footlights and the excessive use of pantomime— this latter issue discussed with reference to Ristori.<sup>73</sup> On a subsequent engagement in London she lamented the fact that she had to move from the Court Theatre, a relatively small theatre, to the Princess's where the audience was used to melodrama and tended to demand demonstrative acting and where an additional proscenium frame had been mounted in order to reduce the size of the stage. According to Modjeska, this made upstage action almost impossible and, as a result, she was forced to play downstage, in sharp contrast to her tendency to "avoid the glare of the footlights [in order to] move freely in all directions."<sup>74</sup> By the same token, she was dismissive of the star system where all the company tended to "behave so as to bring out in relief all the points of the star."<sup>75</sup> However, she did not altogether approve of the "modernistic" method adopted by Duse either, and of

the intensity with which she abandons to the feelings and sufferings of the character she personates (...) you do not realize anymore that you are at the theatre, that there is an actress on the boards; you

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72. Cook, pp.409-410.

73. See Modjeska, pp.232-234.

74. Modjeska, p.442.

75. Modjeska, p.351.

cease analyzing, you only feel that you are in the presence of terrible pain, despair, and agony.<sup>76</sup>

Therefore, due to her critical stance towards both old and new acting styles in favour of what would rather appear as a blend of the two, Modjeska seems to mark a transition from histrionic grand manner to nuanced modern style.

A group of international actresses contemporary to Modjeska — Desclée, Duse and Réjane— came to be identified with modern drama as they abandoned the tragic repertoire and chose to interpret modern, wayward women. Aimée Desclée first toured England in 1873 with a repertoire of sentimental dramas by Dumas and Meilhac and Halévy, presenting a gallery of wayward women to which she brought new realism, as Stokes suggests.<sup>77</sup> Her style, which was directed towards realism but was not altogether free from the conventions of the picture stage suited the representation of the fin de siècle type characterized by

the ambiguous features of the *jolie-laide*, elegance accompanied by a dangerous irregularity in the features, a precocious poise signifying the unpredictable.<sup>78</sup>

She was described as a nervous actress, a quality later ascribed to Duse and interpreted as a manifestation of the uneasiness of many a modern woman.

Desclée's legacy seemed to be taken up by Duse in her frequent tours in England during the 1890s, who came to embody the quintessential, turn of the century nervous woman and encoded her modernity in her repertoire which included

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76. Modjeska, p.524.

77. John Stokes, 'Femme Fatale as Scapegoat: The Modernity of Aimée Desclée', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 24 (1990), 365-378.

78. Stokes, 'Desclée', p.366.



typical fin de siècle heroines, such as the "fallen woman", the "woman with a past" and the New Woman. Her style appeared to be utterly different from the visually impressive grand manner and was characterized by minute actions and downplaying.

The third international actress who moved in Desclée and Duse's footsteps was Gabrielle Réjane. According to the *Cambridge Guide*, Réjane was one of the most brilliant actresses of the Boulevard who excelled in light comedies. She spent most of her career at the Vaudeville where she scored a big success in *Madame Sans-Gêne* by Sardou and introduced Ibsen's *A Doll's House* to the French stage in 1893. She made her London debut in 1894 and was hailed as a representative of naturalistic acting in her portrayal of a working-class girl in *Madame Sans-Gêne*. Clement Scott described her as a "plain-speaking Queen of the Laundry", maybe in an attempt to follow a widely used pattern of looking at the stage as a throne and to celebrated actresses as Player Queens. In his view she was

Quick, alert, clever at slang and repartee, an artist to her fingertips, inventive in business, with the audience always in her grasp, and only occasionally guilty of the crime of excess.<sup>79</sup>

Réjane's interpretation revealed all the "wild tomboy spirits" required by *Madame Sans-Gêne* which according to Scott would be a difficult role for contemporary English actresses, who, unlike Réjane, would find it hard to render "the wild recklessness, the infinite fun, with the concealed tender heart", that are essentials in the character."<sup>80</sup> A description of the actress which appeared in the *Yellow Book* also focused on her interpretation of the Parisian

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79. *Illustrated London News*, 30 June 1894.

80. *Illustrated London News*, 30 June 1894.

washerwoman, seen as the role best suited to her "manifold resources":

Many a time has Réjane appeared in cap, cotton frock, and white apron, many a time in robes of state, glittering with diamonds; she has worn the buskin or the sock, demeaned herself like a gutter heroine, or dropped the stately curtsy of the highborn lady. But never, except in *Madame Sans-Gêne* has she been able to bring all her roles into one focus, exhibit her whole wardrobe, and yet remain one and the same person, compress into one evening the whole of her life.<sup>81</sup>

The tendency to interpret the "natural" actress's performance in terms of "living" or "becoming" the part was increasingly common in the criticism of the 1890s and often recurs in reviews of Duse. It could be explained in terms of the shift in acting style brought about by fin de siècle actresses, from the presentational theatre of the mid-nineteenth century to the modern theatre "concerned with self-knowledge and motivation", as Stokes has said of Desclée.<sup>82</sup> This concept is endorsed by Duvignaud's analysis of the changing nature of dramatic characters in the late nineteenth century whereby the easily codified character-type in historical plays and melodrama was superseded by the "case" or problem character in the problem play.<sup>83</sup>

Between Desclée's English debut in 1873 and Réjane's tour in 1894 Sarah Bernhardt achieved the status of pivotal

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81. Dauphin Meunier, 'Madame Réjane', *Yellow Book*, 11 (1894), 197-206 (p.205).

82. Stokes, 'Desclée', p.372.

83. Duvignaud, pp.156-157.



French and international actress on the London stage.<sup>84</sup> I agree with Findlater when he suggests that Bernhardt managed to create:

A new kind of icon woman. In some ways she was a precursor of the New Woman—but in others she was the quintessence of the old, a sort of ageless she-Ancient.<sup>85</sup>

This was due to her resistance towards modern problem plays and her choice of plays tailored to fit her personality, like *Fedora* and *Theodora* written by Sardou as special vehicles for Bernhardt. Her repertoire has been described as

[A] long procession of fairy tale princesses, martyrs and repentant courtesans, in a variety of historical—distant foreign and legendary settings.<sup>86</sup>

These roles offered great scope for emotionalism and relied heavily on the pictorial potential of the "gilded" stage. Bernhardt's larger than life heroines were effectively portrayed through an acting style which centred around "externalizing inner emotions" resulting in a pathetic, passionate and pictorial discourse. In her frequent adoption of sculptural poses and attitudes she was reminiscent of Ristori but, as Aston argues:

Whereas Ristori possessed a physique which matched her larger-than-life manner of playing, one attraction of

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84. Bernhardt's English career is discussed in Elaine Aston, *Sarah Bernhardt: A French Actress on the English Stage* (Oxford: Berg, 1989); and in J.C. Trewin, 'Bernhardt on the London Stage', in Salmon, ed., pp.111-131.

85. Findlater, 'Bernhardt', p.108.

86. Aston, *Sarah Bernhardt*, p.91.

Bernhardt's stage presence lay in her contrast between the sheer power of her acting and the slightness of her physical build.<sup>87</sup>

To Victorian theatregoers, Bernhardt with her serpentine grace and

All her charms subverted the Victorian ideology of passive femininity, of the sexless female. It was virtually impossible for an English actress to achieve the same image of impunity, because it was Sarah's Frenchness or her Parisian aura which distanced her sufficiently in the eyes of the Puritan from the notion of chaste and virginal womanhood.<sup>88</sup>

The titillating image of Bernhardt could be seen as the ultimate representation of the femme fatale on the stage.

The cult of exoticism was revived by the London tours of the Japanese actress Sada Yacco in 1900 and 1901 who appealed to English audiences for being a player "without pose and self-consciousness" and for providing an insight into a different stage tradition with its "mixture of elements."<sup>89</sup> With her the age of international theatre actresses approached its end, a last glimpse of "stages in rivalry" being offered by Bernhardt and Duse's last tours in the 1920s. In the twentieth century with the birth and rise of the film industry the international theatre star both as an icon woman and object of consumption was progressively ousted by the silent movie star.

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87. Aston, *Sarah Bernhardt*, p.21.

88. Aston, *Sarah Bernhardt*, p.81.

89. *The Times*, 19 June 1901.





*Figure 1: Adelaide Ristori as Lady Macbeth*





ADELAIDE RISTORI.

*Figure 2: Adelaide Ristori as Queen Elizabeth*





*Figure 3: Adelaide Ristori as Mary Stuart*





*Figure 4: Adelaide Ristori and her family*

*Figure 5: Adelaide Ristori as Marie Antoinette*





*Figure 5: Adelaide Ristori as Marie Antoinette*





*Figure 6: Eleonora Duse as Camille*





*Figure 7: Eleonora Duse as Marguerite Gautier*





*Figure 8: Eleonora Duse as Nora*





*Figure 9: Eleonora Duse as Paula Tanqueray*





*Figure 10: Eleonora Duse as Magda*





*Figure 11: Eleonora Duse - Portrait*



#### 4. ADELAIDE RISTORI'S ENGLISH CAREER

##### (i) An Italian "Player Queen". Adelaide Ristori on the English Stage in 1856.

On June 4th, 1856 Adelaide Ristori opened her first tour in England at the Lyceum Theatre with *Medea*. A portrait of the Italian actress published in the *Illustrated London News* introduced her to English audiences and stressed her "unquestioned eminence" attained after "repeated efforts", since "genius has many phases, each indicating a certain stage of growth". This article refers to her Paris tour in 1855, turning point of Ristori's career and her first tour ever in a foreign country and argues that prior to the Parisian venture "she had acted with proportionate success, though not always in the highest roles", a comment which is intended to forge for English readers the image of an internationally celebrated actress, who had "secured her position when she gained the suffrages of the Parisian."<sup>1</sup>

At that time, achieving success on the French stage was no small feat for a foreign actress, due to the high status of the theatre in France which could boast a theatre organization like the Comédie Française, first national endowed theatre in Europe, and an outstanding theatre school like the Conservatoire. Therefore Ristori's early Parisian success was likely to guarantee her a good reception in the demanding theatre world of London. The atmosphere of high expectation surrounding Ristori's debut was captured in a near voyeuristic tone by the *Times*:

Rumours of Mme Ristori's success in Paris had travelled across the Channel to the effect that enthusiastic Frenchmen considered the Italian artist the most wonderful avatar of the tragic muse that had ever displayed itself to mortal gaze. Surely here was

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1. *Illustrated London News*, 7 June 1856.



enough to justify, not merely curiosity, but a feeling akin to anxiety; and though our expression may not be of the most elegant, we will venture to say that the audience was actually *gaping* with expectation long before the curtain rose.<sup>2</sup>

Another distinctive feature of Ristori's early international career appeared to be her rivalry with the celebrated French actress Rachel, as the *Illustrated London News* remarks:

In both there is the same florid exuberant action, the same startling and occasional effects: but there is suavity, spontaneity and intensity in the general manner of Ristori(...) Nature's gifts are all to Ristori.<sup>3</sup>

The similarities between Ristori and Rachel, who had played five seasons in England between 1841 and 1855 and had pioneered the age of international actresses, were often highlighted by reviewers. The *Times* saw in Ristori:

A great actress (...) who was not only to do away with all our old notions, but even to teach us that Mlle Rachel, for so many years deemed unapproachable, remained unapproachable no longer.<sup>4</sup>

The *Saturday Review* placed Ristori's performance on a level with:

The very greatest achievement of tragic acting. Perhaps she has not the intensity of Mlle Rachel —

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2. *The Times*, 5 June 1856.

3. *Illustrated London News*, 7 June 1856.

4. *The Times*, 5 June 1856.



she does not venture on such wild bursts of energy, nor represent mental agony with such force of physical convulsion; but she has the advantage in repose, in dignity and in evenness of power.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that Ristori tended to adopt more subdued tones in her style compared to Rachel's was also pointed out by the *Athenaeum*:

Madame Ristori's delivery is admirable: never overmeasured — never feverishly hurried. She may not pile up a *tirade* to a climax with the graduated and progressive force of her compeer; but she throws a hundred tones into as many words, and this without affectation, and consequently without fatigue to the listener.<sup>6</sup>

This article also states the wish that critics and audiences should move beyond the mere comparison between Ristori and Rachel and be able to express a balanced and competent evaluation of Ristori's art as a result of their improved knowledge of the international stage since Rachel's English debut fifteen years earlier. It expresses fears that, although Ristori's English public was "less Siddonian or Keanite or Macreadish, and altogether less insular than Rachel's public had been", it would nonetheless find Ristori's means of executions difficult to understand. Some critics feared that the choice of *Medea* as her debut role, in which Ristori had triumphed the year before in France, might prove to be a disadvantage in England because, as Giorcelli points out, the play and the character of *Medea* could have been perceived to be quite alien to the English tradition on account of the violent themes which required a

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5. *Saturday Review*, 14 June 1856.

6. *Athenaeum*, 7 June 1856.



particularly vivid portrayal.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore early reviewers tended to show dissatisfaction with the play which was considered to be dramatically weak:

That an English audience should listen with enthusiastic eagerness to three representations of Mr Legouv e's *Medea*, is a high compliment to the actress who made that ill-written play endurable as it was in our power to bestow. Englishmen are not fond of classical plays, and for classical plays that have undergone a modern French reconstruction we have a natural and legitimate abhorrence.<sup>8</sup>

However, the play was considered to be "obviously written to be acted" and as a play that was quite well known to English audiences appeared to be:

Not ill chosen for Ristori's debut, when she had to meet a public anxious to decide on her merits, and not willing to trouble themselves with the disentanglement of a new story.<sup>9</sup>

As Aston argues,<sup>10</sup> Legouv e's reworking of the Greek tragedy offered a sympathetic *Medea* which mitigated the most violent aspects of "the evil woman of all time, elevated to the mythical status of female monster."<sup>11</sup> The role had previously been offered to Rachel who had refused it on the grounds of the manifest difficulty of facing nineteenth-

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7. See Cristina Giorcelli, 'Adelaide Ristori sulle scene britanniche e irlandesi', *Teatro Archivio*, 5 (1981), 81-147, (pp.85-86).

8. *Saturday Review*, 14 June 1856.

9. *The Times*, 5 June 1856.

10. See Aston, 'Ristori's *Medea*', pp.38-39.

11. Ferris, p.112.



century audiences with what Ferris has described as "the ultimate female transgression: a mother who kills her own children."<sup>12</sup> Ristori also argues in her *Memoirs* that she had refused to stage former versions of the play because she revolted from

the idea of a woman who, by her own hand, and with deliberate design, could murder her children.<sup>13</sup>

On reading Legouvé's version Ristori enthusiastically accepted the writer's choice of making the murder "both just and necessary"<sup>14</sup> and decided to "arrange the last scene in such a way as to conceal the death of the children from the public."<sup>15</sup> The *Athenaeum* gave a detailed, if not altogether favourable account of Ristori's "mild" *Medea*:

The Sorceress has been almost entirely forgotten. The cauldron of poisons is gratuitously hidden - the cup of human tears is too largely emptied. The Colchican Princess has here little to distinguish her from any deserted woman who seeks justice, if not generosity, from her faithless lover (...). The very jealousy is to the last soothed by tenderness and chequered with hope.<sup>16</sup>

This review also pointed out that Legouvé's rewriting of the myth was "neatly shaped into scenes and acts", each ending "with an attitude, an effect and a tableau", all

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12. Ferris, p.125.

13. Adelaide Ristori, *Memoirs and Artistic Studies* (London: Allen, 1888), p.200. This text is a translation of her *Ricordi e studi Artistici* (Turin: Roux, 1887).

14. Ristori, *Memoirs*, p.201.

15. Ristori, *Memoirs*, p.204.

16. *Athenaeum*, 7 June 1856.



centred on Ristori "in order to bring down the house."<sup>17</sup> To London critics Ristori's style seemed particularly well suited to express ferocious anger and maternal anguish and *Medea* provided her with an extremely good vehicle for the display of her "picture acting" reliant on the construction of energetic physical poses which could express a wide range of clashing emotions, as for instance in the "leopard simile" scene:

Ristori would do what the leopard does who bears his victim to his cave and tears it limb from limb. This gives occasion for one of the finest pieces of Mme Ristori' acting. She imitates the action of the animal with that kind of general imitation which a poetical figure makes congenial to an excited mind. She affects the proud triumphant look of the splendid brute and seems to draw the victim on and divide its bleeding body; but she does this not as a person would who wished to represent a leopard, but as a person would to whose mind the picture of a leopard was vividly present; and it is the preservation of this distinction which separates the acting of a refined artist from that of a powerful mimic.<sup>18</sup>

Commentaries on the roles forming Ristori's repertoire on her London debut tended to single out the particularly distinctive features of her acting and gave evidence of her larger-than-life style, complemented by her imposing physique:

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17. *Athenaeum*, 7 June 1856.

18. *Saturday Review*, 14 June 1856.



Nothing can be more graceful and effective than Ristori's play of the arms and hands. It is a study of itself.<sup>19</sup>

The same point is made in reviews of *Pia de' Tolomei*:

The play of arms and hands was one of the most admirable characteristics of her acting.<sup>20</sup>

Her pantomimic ability reflected in the refined and frequent use of byplay:

It is the characteristic of Mme Ristori's acting that she unites passionate impulse with the most finished and careful rendering of details (...) Her by-play is exhaustless.<sup>21</sup>

Her ability to impress the audience on her first entrance, already noticed in *Medea*, was considered remarkable in *Rosmunda*:

The mere effect produced by her entrance was indescribable. She was inexpressibly stately and at the same time inexpressibly malignant(...) In the third act flashes of joy pass over her. The face of Rosmunda(...) is a masterpiece of a byplay on the part of Mme Ristori.<sup>22</sup>

At her benefit performance where she performed Pellico's *Francesca da Rimini*, she struck the audience "with her looks

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19. *The Times*, 5 June 1856.

20. *Saturday Review*, 28 June 1856.

21. *Saturday Review*, 5 July 1856.

22. *The Times*, 30 June 1856.



more than the poet [did] with his words."<sup>23</sup> The union of "beauty, force, terror, tenderness and intense passion higher than any single presentiment yet seen,"<sup>24</sup> aroused great admiration and her appeal as great tragic muse displaying a distinctive statuesque style deeply impressed Queen Victoria herself:

Such acting as hers I have never seen. She throws Rachel into the shade. She is a magnificent looking person (...) Every attitude and action is like that of an antique statue!<sup>25</sup>

As warm admirers of opera, English audiences also praised in Ristori's style the operatic features transferred to the realm of spoken theatre, as pointed out by both the *Times* and the *Athenaeum*. Reading these two quotes one could almost think that critics were referring to an opera singer:

The charm of her voice, the power of modulating it were so manifest that none could resist its fascination (...) An artist who for sublimity in the expression of tragic emotion is probably beyond parallel.<sup>26</sup>

Not merely the single sounds of her voice, but its gamut of unequalled range, have the music of Italy in them.<sup>27</sup>

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23. *The Times*, 15 July 1856.

24. *Athenaeum*, 14 June 1856.

25. Rowell, *Victoria*, p.68.

26. *The Times*, 5 June 1856.

27. *Athenaeum*, 7 June 1856.



In fact, the way to Ristori's extraordinary success had been paved by great Italian opera singers like Pasta and Malibran who had enjoyed enormous success in England — also because opera was unanimously considered an entertainment of a higher status. The rivalry between opera and drama in Victorian England was particularly marked during the summer season when the playbill usually consisted of foreign, travelling, dramatic companies complemented by a lively operatic scene. While Ristori was playing at the Lyceum, operas were performed at Her Majesty's and at Drury Lane featuring internationally acclaimed singers like Grisi and Wagner.

Ristori's success during this season was enhanced by a general feeling, expressed by the London press, that she had performed in plays that did not provide her with vehicles which were entirely worthy of her talents, with the one exception of Alfieri's *Rosmunda*, rated as a play where the actress was "worthily employed" and of "all the pieces much the finest."<sup>28</sup> The press felt she should make a come-back in a play that was worthy of her, as in the *Saturday Review* for example:

If Mme Ristori can make as much as she does of this [*Medea*], what would she not do if she played Lady Macbeth — a part exactly suited to her?<sup>29</sup>

The plays chosen for the London season, *Medea*, *Pia de' Tolomei*, *Mary Stuart*, *Rosmunda*, *Francesca da Rimini* and Goldoni's comedy *La locandiera* could be viewed as a cross section of her repertoire at the time when she was trying to achieve international fame. By presenting five tragedies she aimed at being acknowledged mainly as a tragedienne in the wake of the success she enjoyed the previous year in Paris

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28. *The Times*, 30 June 1856.

29. *Saturday Review*, 14 June 1856.



in famous tragic roles such as *Phèdre*, *Mirra*, *Francesca da Rimini* and *Mary Stuart*. With *La locandiera* she displayed her versatility, as the reviewers noted, though they still felt that she was essentially a tragic actress:

The powdered hair and the smart frippery of the middle of the eighteenth century sit as easily upon her as the antique robe of Colchis. [But in comedies she leaves] the greater part of her resources unemployed(...) Her physique, her voice, her deportment, all point to tragedy, and tragedy must remain the preponderating element in her repertoire whenever she visits London and Paris.<sup>30</sup>

By opening her English season with *Medea* and by performing *Mary Stuart*, which had previously been a hallmark of Rachel's tours in England, the element of competition between the two actresses which was picked up by reviewers could be said to have been deliberately planned.

Ristori also aimed at striking a patriotic note with the play originally intended for her debut but censored by the Lord Chamberlain, Alfieri's *Mirra*, which had been her opening piece in Paris the year before and had aroused the interest of the English press which expressed disappointment over the Lord Chamberlain's ban.<sup>31</sup> However, Ristori's commitment to national drama was manifest in her choice of Alfieri's *Rosmunda*, Pellico's *Francesca da Rimini* and Marenco's *Pia de' Tolomei*. The critics' attention was also directed towards features of her stage persona that would contribute to her ladylike image. Reviewers of her *Mary Stuart* make frequent reference to her "noble deportment and

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30. *The Times*, 14 July 1856.

31. See *Saturday Review*, 19 July 1856.



her ladylike nature,"<sup>32</sup> "the crowning grace of her art"<sup>33</sup> and her "queenly demeanour."<sup>34</sup>

As a consequence of this early success on the London stage, Ristori, with her Compagnia Drammatica Italiana, was granted engagements for the following two years and would regularly perform in England till her last tour in 1883. Proof of the favour Ristori had found with London theatre world during this tour, is the *Medea* burlesque performed by the comic actor Frederick Robson where he parodied her famous acting style.<sup>35</sup>

Ristori's success as an actress was also heightened by her perceived moral and private virtues which contributed to the creation of a model actress. She came to London in the heyday of Victorian England, that "gilded age" for which she "supplied some of the gilt"<sup>36</sup> in Knepler's words, and appeared to embody the principles of Queen Victoria's England, a perfect union of nobility and bourgeoisie values, hence the tendency to look at her as a distinguished and ladylike actress. She appeared to be a self-made woman whose most extraordinary virtue had been rewarded by a noble marriage and was praised as a model of marital and filial affection. As Carlson suggests, "Ristori was eminently respectable when the Mid-Victorian passion for respectability was at its height."<sup>37</sup> Her much-talked-of political commitment at a time when Italy was struggling for independence from foreign rule and aiming at national

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32. *The Times*, 12 June 1856.

33. *Illustrated London News*, 14 June 1856.

34. *Athenaeum*, 7 June 1856.

35. See Westland Marston, *Our Recent Actors*, 2 vols (London: Sampson, 1888), II, chapter XIV.

36. Knepler, p.107.

37. Marvin Carlson, 'Ristori in America', in Salmon, ed., pp.203-223 (p.215).



unification helped to arouse interest in her in the rest of Europe and added glamour to her public image. However, recent criticism argues that Ristori was in the first place 'a shrewd promoter of her own cause', who had successfully mingled her charm and talent with her noble status.<sup>38</sup>

Ristori's early English biographers tended to stress her unparalleled private virtue: in a pamphlet meant to spread her fame at the time of her English debut, published with the flattering title *The Siddons of Modern Italy*, actual comments on her art and roles are comparatively scanty, while the stress falls on her flawless moral qualities and her exemplary family life:

Two very charming children now reflect the virtue and talents of their mother. Their presence near her (...) inspires her to exertion in her artistic triumph. Their happy smiling faces beaming with joy at her success, doubtless afford her more pleasurable encouragement than all the plaudits, encores, bouquet and bravos which fall to her share at every representation.<sup>39</sup>

An article in the *Englishwoman's Review* gave a lengthy account of Ristori's active role in revolutionary Rome as a "sister of charity in the French besieged Rome" which abounded in ludicrous details:

The Actress is transformed into a Sister of Charity and hastens to dress the wounded without asking whether they are friends or foes.<sup>40</sup>

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38. Giorcelli, p.93.

39. E. P. Hingston, *The Siddons of Modern Italy: Adelaide Ristori. A Sketch of her Life and Twenty Words Relative to her Genius* (London: Lacy, 1856), p.16.

40. Enrico Montarco, 'Adelaide Ristori: A Sketch', *Englishwoman's Review*, 27 June 1857.



Pictures of Ristori reinforced her queenly image. The tendency to impose on Ristori a player-queen stereotype was also reflected in her iconography, especially in those pictures where she is surrounded by her family, or those where she is enthroned in queenly postures which tend to resemble those of Queen Victoria in her portraits.

It could be argued that the success of the 1856 English tour was due first to Ristori's ability to shine in a tragic repertoire, which was also tinged with patriotic colours at a time when there was growing international concern for the Italian nationalistic cause. Secondly, Ristori was surrounded by an aura of respectability which, as mentioned earlier, lifted her status above that of other famous actresses, such as Rachel, and which, as I shall argue later, was enhanced by her choice of a queenly repertoire and played to her advantage also in her later tours in England.<sup>41</sup>

Ristori's international career which was launched in the 1850s had been prepared in the years from 1846 to 1851 during which she strengthened her reputation as a distinguished actress in Italy. These years marked also an intense period her private life, scattered with extraordinary events of a marked romantic flavour.<sup>42</sup>

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41. I am indebted to Susan Bassnett for allowing me to read a typescript of her forthcoming essay on Ristori, in Michael Booth, John Stokes, Susan Bassnett, *Three Tragic Actresses: Siddons, Rachel, Ristori* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Bassnett presents an image of Ristori as a "respectable revolutionary" and draws attention to her intense experimenting with repertoires in the years of her rise to international fame, which the author sees as a crucial issue in establishing Ristori's international success.

42. A child of Venetian wandering actors, Ristori went on the stage for the first time at the age of three months carried in a basket in the farce *I regali di Capodanno*. Her early debut as "new year's gift" humorously recollected in her memoirs set her in the typical tradition of "child of the stage" which by that time was the most natural access to the acting profession. She soon became a regular member of her parents' company where she began "to take the tone and airs of a grown-up woman," and was first cast as a walk-on, then in small speaking parts in farces and *comédies larmoyants*. At twelve she obtained her first engagement as *ingénue* in the well known Moncalvo company where the "sword and dagger became the familiar weapons of my craft," as she was



On her Italian tours, the press stressed the novelty of her "natural acting" which seemed to go beyond the mid-nineteenth century convention of the Italian stage and the artificiality of the old declamatory school and "move towards a simple and wise imitation of truth."<sup>43</sup> As Mary Stuart she appeared to give a good illustration of her new approach to historical characters, "by capturing the nuances and psychological traits of the character and achieving artistic beauty through simple and natural means."<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, she seemed to break away from the restrictions imposed by "the school of declamation, artifice and academic gestures, [in order to] pursue truth and nature."<sup>45</sup>

In the critics' opinion, Ristori's reform of acting technique consisted in a further development of the teachings of the actor Gustavo Modena. Following in Modena's footsteps, Ristori mitigated the exaggerated features of neoclassic style, which relied on impressive gestures and baroque elocution, but she also avoided falling into "heavy

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entrusted for the first time with tragic roles. At fifteen she played the title role in Pellico's *Francesca da Rimini* which might have secured her an engagement as *primadonna* in the company; but her father persuaded her to sign a contract with one of Italy's major companies, the Turin based, state subsidized Royal Sardinian Company. Under the guidance of the company's leading lady Carlotta Marchionni, the most accomplished actress of the early nineteenth century, Ristori started an important period of stage apprenticeship during which she would set the basic principles of her art and shape her repertoire, progressively geared towards ambitious tragic roles. As she stated in her *Memoirs*, at that time she began to devote herself to character study in a way that would later result in a number of artistic studies where she described and discussed in detail her work on her roles. See, Ristori, *Memoirs*, pp.5-8. However, when she joined the *Compagnia Ducale di Parma* in 1841 as leading lady, the company's manager Romualdo Mascherpa expressed his doubts on her aptitude for tragedy, though she had scored a success as Mary Stuart in Schiller's play of that name and even advised her to abandon entirely tragic roles. See Ristori, *Memoirs*, p.146.

43. *L'Arte*, 12 July 1851.

44. *L'Arte*, 12 July 1851.

45. *L'Opinione*, 1 March 1852.



realism that was manifestly adopted by all Modena's pupils", as *L'Estetica drammatica* pointed out.<sup>46</sup>

Her fame was also heightened by her overt support of the patriotic cause as exemplified by her choice of fairly unusual roles, often strictly prohibited by censorship, such as Alfieri's *Mirra* or Battaglia's *Luisa Strozzi*. Both were historical plays which depicted atrocities suffered under foreign rule and hinted at the current Italian situation. Barbiera suggests that productions of heroic plays on the Italian stage mirrored "the great dramatic pageant" which was actually taking place in Italy, the Risorgimento:

One could breathe an air of greatness. That was great art, which expressed a life based on great ideals.<sup>47</sup>

However, as Monaco argues, Ristori's was a patriotic theatre of "great ideals" with little political commitment and tended to express ecumenic and easily recognizable values without aiming at a strong political opposition or a radical transformation of society:

Political theatre aims at disrupting and changing reality. Patriotic theatre expresses the most theatrical values of the Risorgimento, but not the most genuinely popular.<sup>48</sup>

As Meldolesi and Taviani show, the 1848 movement in Italy inflamed the theatre world and actors took an active part in the upheavals of the Risorgimento which occurred all over Italy. The acting community benefited from the dynamic

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46. *L'Estetica Drammatica*. Genoa, Civico Museo Biblioteca dell'Attore, fondo Ristori, press cuttings 1851-1852.

47. Raffaello Barbiera, *Diademi, donne e Madonne dell'800* (Milan: Garzanti, 1940), p.241.

48. Wanda Monaco, *La repubblica del teatro* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1968), pp.158-159. See especially chapter IV: '*Il teatro è merce*'. [Unless otherwise indicated all translations are my own].



social situation of the years around 1848 and saw in the "people's Spring" a real step forward towards their own emancipation:

Actors were outcasts (...) neglected by literary culture and had no productive means of their own; but, though they were outcasts, they were still close to people and their lives (...) They believed in the people's Spring and maybe they hoped that their status as actors might finally improve—that the theatre might finally emancipate itself.<sup>49</sup>

Ristori's private life reflected the surge of freedom brought about by the Risorgimento.<sup>50</sup>

Her new status as Marchioness Capranica del Grillo further increased her popularity and helped to create an image of her as a paragon of virtue. Giuliano played a decisive role in establishing his wife's fame, spearheading her tours abroad by introducing her to Italian and foreign high society. However, her noble status, an essential element in shaping her glamorous image abroad, did not seem to exert the same appeal in Italy. Gustavo Modena, a politically committed actor and stage manager, refused

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49. See Claudio Meldolesi and Ferdinando Taviani, *Teatro e spettacolo nel primo Ottocento* (Rome: Laterza, 1991), p.253.

50. In 1846 a major event occurred, crucial for her private as well as professional life. While playing in Rome at the Teatro Metastasio owned by the noble family Capranica del Grillo, she fell in love with young Giuliano, son of the Marquis Capranica who would not consent to the marriage of his son to an actress. The couple was forced into a secret marriage which was validated only a few years later after the birth of their first child. This event was of no small consequence in Ristori's career. As Meldolesi suggests, Ristori's case was exceptional insofar as she gained from the 1848 revolutionary spirit the strength not to leave the stage for good: "it could be thought that without the 1848 movement, history would have not had the actress queen." See Meldolesi and Taviani, p.254. Marriage to nobility meant, at the time, retreat from the stage, therefore she took the decision of putting an end to her career as soon as her existing contract expired. Ristori's withdrawal from the stage was shortlived, however. In 1851 she returned to the stage for a benefit performance and the following year she accepted the role of *prima attrice* in the Royal Sardinian Company.



Ristori's offer to join her on her first English tour because he saw in Ristori's foreign tours a means of consolidating the actress's own fame, which would even be detrimental to the quality of her theatre, as he bitterly pointed out in his letters:

Ristori is a great actress(..) who has become famous due to a number of favourable events (...) She tries to take advantage of her own fame and gain power. In order to do so she does not need to be surrounded by capable artists. Four chairs and a table that respond to her during the play are enough.<sup>51</sup>

In the years preceding her Parisian success Ristori outlined the main principles of her interpretations, and chose her major roles. Her repertoire tended to reflect her noble status as she progressively focused on historical dramas and eventually restricted her characters to queens. In this way she gained the title of "queen of the Italian stage":

Ristori is a queen, the queen of all actresses who perform in Italy.<sup>52</sup>

Tommaso Salvini, who was later to become the greatest Italian actor of the nineteenth century, after his debut in 1847 with the company where Ristori was leading actress, remarked that:

Adelaide Ristori was the ideal interpreter of many female characters and heroines in drama and comedy to whom she could give the flavour and freshness of truth

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51. Gustavo Modena, *Epistolario. 1827-1861*, ed. by T. Grandi (Rome: Vittoriano, 1955), p.225.

52. *Il genio*, 25 December 1852.



in art (...) At that time Adelaide Ristori truly was the most attractive Italian actress.<sup>53</sup>

Her high status in Italian theatre is reflected in plays that were tailor-made for her by the playwright Gherardi Testa at the end of the 1840s: *Ciò che piace alla prima attrice* ("What the leading lady likes") and *Il regno di Adelaide* ("Adelaide's realm").

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Having strengthened her reputation in Italy in the early 1850s, Ristori started preparing her first foreign tour. Letters held in the Ristori archive show that the Parisian tour in 1855 was actually intended to help financially both the Royal Sardinian Company and its leading lady and had been planned as early as 1853.<sup>54</sup> The choice fell on Paris because, as Bignami informs us, the French capital city could guarantee high profits.<sup>55</sup> The role of Giuliano Capranica was crucial to the success of the company especially in establishing contacts with the Parisian nobility, and Italian and French opera singers. Another important feature was the effort towards technical improvements which aimed at making Ristori's touring theatre suitable to the Parisian stage, which as Bignami states, was technically more advanced.<sup>56</sup>

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53. Tommaso Salvini, *Ricordi, aneddoti ed impressioni* (Milan: Dumolard, 1895), p.80.

54. A selection of letters and documents on the organization of Ristori's Parisian tour is presented in Paola Bignami, *Alle origini dell'impresa teatrale. Dalle carte di Adelaide Ristori* (Bologna: Nuova Alfa, 1988).

55. Bignami, p.22.

56. Bignami, p.42.



The Parisian tour of the Italian company which opened in May 1855 was one of the main events of the Second International Exposition, a major cultural undertaking fostered by the French Emperor who intended to celebrate the era of wealth and progress in Europe by including showpieces of Europe's foremost cultural achievements.

Ristori herself seemed to be aware that recent social changes accounted for her foreign success when she recollected in her memoirs that the French tour of Carolina Internari, another distinguished Italian actress, had been a failure in 1830.<sup>57</sup> As Knepler puts it, by the time of Ristori's early European tours "the age of conspicuous consumption was in full blood", therefore the highly specialized organization of Ristori's theatre seemed to meet the demand of a newly industrialized society.

An efficient organization which would gradually supersede the usual pre-industrial family system and which reflected the industrial development in Europe in the second half of the century, was a main feature in Ristori's early foreign tours. From her first Parisian tour onwards she improved the entrepreneurial side of her profession. Her tours to foreign countries were spearheaded by a publicity campaign based on extensive coverage in the local press complemented by the sale of posters, statues and gadgets which built up high expectation of her debut. The management of her tours, unlike that of the stock nineteenth-century theatre companies, was highly specialized and a number of trained professionals — technicians, tailors, translators, musicians, playwrights — were involved in every production.

Major improvements to her organization were carried out on the eve of a world tour which started in England in the summer of 1873. The English stage provided a general test for the successive worldwide tour. This according to Bignami

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57. Ristori, *Memoirs*, pp. 23-24.



was "more than an artistic achievement" and succeeded in creating the myth of a *donna-mondo*, world-woman.<sup>58</sup>

Ristori's touring theatre relied on a highly competent team where each person was in charge of a particular aspect of the production and guaranteed an elaborate *mise en scène* where the highest priority was given to the *optique du théâtre*. It could be argued that the emphasis on the visually appealing elements of the spectacle made up for the difficulties which could arise when she performed in front of foreign audiences in a language unknown to them. The loss of the fascination exerted by the spoken word, was compensated for by the intensity of gesture, the ability in *jouer le mot*, and the appeal of the costumes. Historical research was a main feature of her theatre and resulted in expensively mounted productions. Ristori had always disapproved of the widespread habit of using repertory costumes and often commissioned historically faithful costumes to the extent that in 1856 she turned to the famous French painter Ary Scheffer to design her costume for *Medea*.<sup>59</sup> References to famous paintings and sculptures for her costumes which she considered an important key to her characters made the realization on stage of *tableaux vivants* or *poses plastiques* imitating a classical style more effective. Her tendency to establish an emotional link with the characters she portrayed induced her to use a costume which had actually belonged to Marie Antoniette, queen of France, when she interpreted this role. Hollander draws a distinction between "dramatic" and "theatrical" costumes chosen by an actor for his/her stage character. The former enables the performer to transform him/herself into the character:

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58. Bignami, p.12.

59. See Ristori's correspondence in the month of January 1856, published in Bignami, pp.92-98.



The dramatic costume may consist of a mere scarf, hat, or a few patches of make-up, or it can be a complete masked disguise (...) while the actor wears it, he must be acting the part or the costume will be meaningless or ridiculous.<sup>60</sup>

Whereas the latter is described as an expansion of the performer's self:

Clothes that simply support the actor's sexual charm and personal appeal (...) only manage to look generally stagy (...) whereas the face and figure of the star are instantly recognizable [they are] personally stylized according to the expectations of the admiring public(...) The sartorial effort is subsumed by the performer. This is truly theatrical dress, the effect it creates is inseparable from the effect of the wearer's self.<sup>61</sup>

Ristori seemed to conceive of her historical costumes as mainly theatrical costumes, according to a fashion widely followed by great nineteenth-century actors whose primary concern was to look like "period works of art". To this purpose they chose to wear fashionable clothes which could be presented as "authentically historical."<sup>62</sup> A choice of costume which highlights the actor's stage persona rather than the character would appear to be a major requirement in what has been defined as *grande attore* theatre where, according to D'Amico:

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60. Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, 2nd edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p.250.

61. Hollander, p.253.

62. Hollander, p.294.



The actor must be first and foremost himself. His mask or character are less important. The great actor offers an image of himself before that of his character.<sup>63</sup>

Furthermore, the variety and richness of costumes and non-verbal elements served essentially to sustain and emphasize the dramatic action which could not fully rely on verbal codes when Ristori toured foreign countries. Registers held in the Ristori Archive in Genoa list costumes, the number of supers and props of some of Ristori's productions and give us an idea of the magnificence of her productions. They range from the sixty costumes required for *Macbeth* to the magnificent *mise en scène* of *Marie Antoinette* with over one hundred costumes.<sup>64</sup> However, efforts towards *grand mise en scène* were not reflected in the casting as performances were centred around the star and little importance was given to the rest of the cast, one of the main features of *grande attore* theatre. As English critics remarked on Ristori's debut:

In recording Madame Ristori's triumph, it is needful to record also that it has been won single-handed(...) the other members of the company are wretched.<sup>65</sup>

## (ii) Ristori and the *Grande Attore* Theatre

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63. Alessandro D'Amico, 'La dittatura dell'attore', in *Problemi del linguaggio teatrale* ed. by Alberto Caracciolo (Genoa: Teatro Stabile di Genova, 1974), pp.115-122 (p.122).

64. See Bignami, Chapter E: '*Lo spettacolo dei grandi numeri*', pp.201-205.

65. Review of *Medea* in *Athenaeum*, 7 June 1856.



The history of Ristori's reception in England sheds light on the interchange between the English and the Italian stage traditions in the nineteenth century.<sup>66</sup>

Ristori was the foremost representative of a unique age in Italian theatre history which centred on the "dictatorship of the actor", as D'Amico puts it; the great actors who exerted a strong appeal on foreign audiences and built their fame principally on their success in far away countries.<sup>67</sup> A mirror of the growing bourgeois society with its cult of strong-willed, assertive individuals, the *grande attore* appealed to new middle class audiences who went to the theatre just to see their idol:

In the nineteenth century actors began to realize the power of attraction they could exert. Audiences were affected to such a degree that they would go to the theatre simply to see the actors, or rather an actor, who would become their idol.<sup>68</sup>

The *grandi attori* were a product of the Romantic age and dominated the theatre scene throughout the nineteenth century gradually asserting their prominence at the expense of all other elements of theatre production. As Meldolesi suggests, *grandi attori* were great not because they were endowed with peculiarly great qualities, but rather because they were "more than actors" who stood out as mirrors of the culture of their time.<sup>69</sup> Though not a peculiarly Italian

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66. For a comprehensive survey of the Italian stage in the nineteenth century see: Meldolesi and Taviani, *Teatro*; Roberto Alonge, *Teatro e spettacolo nel secondo Ottocento* (Rome: Laterza, 1991)

67. A. D'Amico, 'Dittatura', p. 121. On the rise of the *grande attore* in nineteenth-century Italian theatre see also: Silvio D'Amico, *Tramonto del Grande Attore* (Milan: Mondadori, 1929) and Gigi Livio, *La scena italiana* (Milan: Mursia, 1989).

68. A. D'Amico, 'Dittatura', p.121.

69. Meldolesi and Taviani, p.271.



phenomenon — the first *grande attore* was born out of the English tradition, Edmund Kean — it took on distinctive features in Italy. These actors were "the product of the struggle for survival."<sup>70</sup> Dramatic theatre in Italy during the early decades of the century seemed doomed to obscurity and was confined to the marginal activity of travelling companies. This situation reached a peak in the years between 1830 and 1856 which were marked by the complete absence of major playwrights. Theatre practice was deeply affected by the lack of a new national dramatic tradition, which was also hampered by the strict controls of censorship and in order to survive, companies had to resort to the readaptation of old plays, mainly farces; Goldoni's comedies, classic tragedies and various novelties from France, often hastily and inaccurately translated. The weakness of the repertoire negatively affected theatre practice, but allowed the discovery of new elements on which, in the absence of a strong literature, the production could rest and, what was more, allowed the birth of what Alonge has defined as "actor's theatre."<sup>71</sup> The three outstanding *grandi attori*, Ristori Salvini and Rossi, were children of the stage at a time when dramatic theatre was considered a low status art. They expressed a need for renewal which would affect above all the choice of repertoire, the management of the company, and acting technique.

In the years which preceded the creation of Italy as a unified country, which are known as Risorgimento, repression in the individual states grew strong and local authorities tended to strengthen the control of censorship and withdraw their patronage from theatre companies which resulted in financial hardship for theatre people. Actors were therefore on very shaky grounds in Italy, especially from an economic

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70. See A. D'Amico, 'Dittatura', p.117.

71. Alonge, p.17.



perspective, and began to be increasingly drawn to touring abroad. As Carlson points out, after unification the condition of the theatre did not improve appreciably because it did not foster the creation of any important theatre centre with an established company which could receive steady financial support. This accounts for the proclivity of Italy's great actors for international touring. Under their crucial influence Italian theatre succeeded in achieving a higher status and was no longer considered a minor, regionally confined, activity which could not aspire to rival the opera. The idea of coming closer to the status of opera by assimilating its modes and techniques was often recurring in the activity of the *grandi attori*. Ristori felt the appeal of opera but lamented the fact that its privileged status caused dramatic theatre to be neglected:

It seemed impossible to fight against the growing rivalry of the lyric stage [as] the muse of melody seemed alone in favour with the public.<sup>72</sup>

Driven by the desire to challenge the "muse of melody", during her first international tours, she often performed in the official temples of opera and she enhanced the melodramatic quality of her style, borrowing from opera her distinctive pictorial acting, and developing a feeling for the visual and choreographic aspects of the setting. Furthermore, she used to be accompanied in her performances by a small orchestra which, as in melodramas, would highlight the main points of the production. As Meldolesi argues, a major influence in establishing a link between opera and spoken theatre was exerted by Verdi who succeeded in renewing the operatic tradition by stressing the importance of melodramatic elements and devoting attention to the study of character. Verdi conceived a dramatic form

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72. Ristori, *Memoirs*, p.18.



which would stem from the action of characters and expand the dramatic texture of the *partitura*. In this way, he offered a model capable of bridging the gap between opera and spoken theatre. Since Verdi's model tended to give relevance to the acting qualities of the performers, actors could now find a pattern, which, so long as it was still rooted in the opera tradition they longed to equal, could also be adjusted to suit dramatic theatre.<sup>73</sup> Therefore performances of *grandi attori* were built around peak dramatic points anticipated by a growing emotional expectation similar to that provided by situational music in melodrama. Furthermore the influence of operatic style on the *grande attore* made actors heavily reliant on what has been defined as "acting by the footlights" (*recitazione da proscenio*): the actor, like the opera singer, tended to perform downstage by the footlights and deliver his/her solo piece, while the rest of the cast stood upstage. Emphasis was given to points expressing the character's feelings and emotions rather than to the development of the dramatic action as a whole. Ferrone suggests that a counterpart in opera can be found in the difference between *arie* and *recitativi*, the former foregrounding individual expression of feelings, the latter corresponding to dynamic action and providing a link between arias. The attempt at reproducing opera modules led the actor to progressively reduce 'recitatives' in order to emphasize 'arias', a vehicle to express the characters' feelings.<sup>74</sup> The atmosphere which gripped the audience could be created also thanks to technical acquisitions such as gaslight which allowed the auditorium to be darkened and the curtain which would frame and gild the picture.

The *grande attore* style remained within the boundaries of nineteenth-century "grand manner" containing "much

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73. See Meldolesi and Taviani, pp.260-265.

74. Siro Ferrone, 'Problemi di drammaturgia', in *Teatro dell'Italia unita*, ed. by Siro Ferrone (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1980), pp.55-73.



subtlety, but little of the kind of underplaying we associate with realism today."<sup>75</sup> As Knepler points out, grand manner acting consisted of highly standardized gestures and movements:

Hand to heart— love or trust; arms raised— imprecation; arms stretched forward— supplication; and so on. Acting was volatile: there was much falling on one's knees and much rolling on the ground in agony.<sup>76</sup>

Volatile acting was amply exploited by the star who tended to construct his/her performance around points, namely "those stunning bits of vocal exertion or stage business that brought applause."<sup>77</sup> Point by point illustration was the pivotal feature of grand manner acting and consisted of creating

Moments of extreme theatricality serving as central artistic images for each production with the deliberate purpose of bringing down the house.<sup>78</sup>

These features of *grande attore* acting appeared to be extremely captivating when actors performed before foreign audiences, as critics remarked when Ristori played in England:

Noble in voice, grand in attitude, picturesque, graceful and most powerful, the variety and passion of

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75. Marvin Carlson, *The Italian Shakespearians: Performances by Ristori, Salvini and Rossi in England and the United States* (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1985), p.180.

76. Knepler, p.27.

77. Knepler, p.27.

78. Carlson, *The Italian Stage: From Goldoni to D'Annunzio* (New York: McFarland, 1981), p.175.



the artist keep even an audience enthralled which may be entirely ignorant of the actual words delivered (...) the performance was a constant succession of surprises and effects.<sup>79</sup>

Italian actors tended to act out their lines physically and vocally, aiming at creating particularly sharp contrasts, alternating loud impassioned scenes with quiet ones. "Acting out of lines" and "graphic portrayal" of actions were meant both as an aid for comprehension and as a powerful support for emphasizing the emotional content of particular scenes.

Also characteristic of Italian actors was their highly praised vocal ability. They were endowed with trained and flexible voices and often speeches were singled out in a production to be presented as showpieces for their vocal skills. These would often be delivered in the form of 'concerti', namely the interpretation of particularly dramatic setpieces out of whole plays or poems. Such were Gustavo Modena's *Lecturae Dantis* and the sleepwalking scene from *Macbeth*, regularly performed by Ristori.

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The principles of *grande attore* acting are reflected in Ristori's own writings on her art. These tend to have a prescriptive purpose highlighting those skills she believed the "true artist of the stage" should possess, such as mastery of elocution, correct diction, easiness and elegance of posture. In her unpublished essay *Sull'arte mia* she stressed the importance of gesture, since she believed truth in art rested in the close correspondence of a mental image

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<sup>79</sup>. *Era*, 15 June 1873.



with its external expression.<sup>80</sup> Her romantic attitude towards her art meant, in the first place, the pursuit of an idealized truth. Two main romantic principles, *il bello* and *il vero*, are key issues in her art. Furthermore, in this essay Ristori engages in a defence of acting as an art and of the actor as a true artist. In addressing those young women who would like to dedicate themselves to the stage she argues that :

No art is more beneficent, more honourable than the dramatic if a young woman take to it for pure love of it and for no other reason. Next to the pulpit nothing is more productive of good than the stage, if it be understood as the Talmas, the Modenas, the Siddonses and other great actors have understood it.<sup>81</sup>

Here Ristori takes part in the debate over the actor's art which was particularly heated during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. All major European actors, such as Irving, Coquelin and Bernhardt engaged in a passionate defence of their art and their status as true artists of the stage in an effort to fight an age-old anti-theatrical prejudice which had often tended to confine actors to the margins of society.<sup>82</sup>

Another major issue tackled by Ristori is her rejection of naturalistic acting which, as she puts it, "finds too

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80. See Ristori, *Sull'Arte mia*, unpublished manuscript, Rome, Biblioteca Teatrale del Burcardo, autografi Ristori. An English translation of this essay was published as 'My Art' in the *Macmillan's Magazine*, LXXXIII (1900-1901), 182-189.

81. Ristori, 'My Art', p.182.

82. Essays on acting by Irving, Coquelin and others are collected in *Papers on Acting*, ed. by Brander Matthews (New York: Hill & Wang, 1958). See also Sarah Bernhardt, *The Art of the Theatre*, trans. by H. J. Stenning (London: Bles, 1924). Anti-theatrical attitudes in society are discussed in Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).



many partisans in these days." <sup>83</sup> She puts forward the case of Bernhardt's performance as Cleopatra where, in order to achieve naturalism, a real asp had been used during the death scene, which according to Ristori only managed to divert attention from Bernhardt's acting.<sup>84</sup>

Her rejection of excessive naturalism in acting did not imply a dismissal of natural acting which, on the contrary, as she states in her *Memoirs*, had always been a distinctive element of her art. Her acting technique is described as a blend of two schools, the French and the Italian, the former based on "acting by the rules", the latter on "acting by spontaneity". The French style gave her a low key tone, whereas the "Italian fire" allowed a true-to-life expression of passion.<sup>85</sup>

A fundamental issue in her theory of acting is her defence of the emotional approach to her roles. In her *Memoirs* she traces her emotional approach to her roles and the process towards complete identification with the parts in order to "realize the feelings of the character" back to the time of her first engagement with the Royal Sardinian Company. She admits to having often experienced excessive emotion in performing her most impassioned parts to the extent that she would sometimes fall into a fit of spleen or even suffer from nervous attacks, as in one of her first performances as Adrienne Lecouvreur.<sup>86</sup> Her defence of emotionalism was clearly expressed in her answers to William Archer's queries on engaged acting published in his survey *Masks or Faces?* and became a central issue in a later piece

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83. Ristori, 'My Art', p.189.

84. Ristori, 'My Art', p.189.

85. Ristori, *Memoirs*, pp.15-16.

86. Ristori, *Memoirs*, p.12.



of hers entitled *Mie teorie e precetti sull'arte drammatica*.<sup>87</sup>

*Masks or Faces?* came out in 1888 as a report based on contemporary actors' views on the vexed question whether actors feel and whether they ought to feel. Ristori's answers to Archer's queries appear to be in favour of emotionalism especially when she brings forth evidence of her ability to enter the skin of her character by "blushing and growing pale in accordance with the emotion she is portraying",<sup>88</sup> or when she states that as an affective actor she tends to adjust her feelings to the expressive requirements of her role.<sup>89</sup>

Defence of emotionalism is a major concern in Ristori's essay *Mie teorie* where she argues that identification is the only way to a full realization of the feelings of the character. Identification allows a transfer of the feelings experienced by the actor to the audience and this empathy is one of the main objectives of dramatic art, which, in her view, is the most perfect of all arts on account of its power of creating the "greatest illusion" and attracting the audience into "the make believe world of the stage."<sup>90</sup> In order to reinforce her argument in favour of emotionalism she refers to Henry Irving who maintained that sensibility was the main quality of an actor's talent. In his essay 'The stage as it is' (1890) he described acting as an art demanding the sincere self-engagement of the actor who, giving life to his characters, should be able to sound the "gamut of human sensibility". In this way the engaged actor

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87. See William Archer, *Masks or Faces? A Study in the Psychology of Acting* (London: Longman, 1888); Adelaide Ristori, *Mie teorie e precetti sull'arte drammatica*, manuscript M.A., f.R.; published in appendix to Eugenio Buonaccorsi, *La recitazione del "grande attore"* (Genoa: Istituto di storia dell'arte, 1974), pp.65-75.

88. Archer, *Masks or Faces?*, p.122.

89. Archer, *Masks or Faces?*, p.148.

90. Ristori, *Mie teorie*, p.66.



succeeds in holding the audience in his power more than the non-engaged actor. Identification is instrumental to Ristori's aim of expressing the moral values of her characters and results in a sort of ethical identification between the character and the actress, thereby producing an interpretation based on psychological enquiry and moral judgement. As Monaco suggests, for the *grande attore* this process towards identification essentially meant identification or adjustment of the character to the actor rather than of the actor to the character.<sup>91</sup>

Clues to the work of Ristori on her roles can be found in six artistic studies included in her *Memoirs* which shed light on the process through which characters were transferred from the page to the stage. Artistic studies define the interplay between different stages of the character's life. As Ciotti Cavalletto points out, Ristori attempted a historical reconstruction of her characters, which was relevant especially for her repertoire of queens, and tended to define a few clear points around which to weave the thread of the action.<sup>92</sup> Characters analyzed in the artistic studies seem to be identified by two opposing and clearly defined feelings, such as the shift from maternal feelings to revenge in *Medea*, or Queen Elizabeth's "transition from severity to great and generous impulse, which was always so characteristic of this great Queen."<sup>93</sup>

### (iii) Ristori's "Queens" on the English Stage:

Along with *Medea*, which remained a mainstay of Ristori's repertoire in England, four roles were regularly performed to English audiences at different stages of Ristori's career

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91. Monaco, p.168.

92. Giovanna Ciotti Cavalletto, *Attrici e società nell'Ottocento italiano* (Milan: Mursia: 1978), pp.73-74.

93. Ristori, *Memoirs*, p.285.



and seem to testify to her preference for a repertoire of Queens in historical plays. These are *Lady Macbeth*, *Mary Stuart*, *Queen Elizabeth*, *Marie Antoinette*.

### *Donna Macbetto*

During her second tour of England in 1857 Ristori offered a varied repertoire ranging from Goldoni's *La locandiera* to the highly pathetic *Medea*, the pivotal role during her previous tour. She also staged the rather obscure play *Fazio* by the English dramatist Dr Millman. As the *Illustrated London News* remarked, the play was not in favour with the critics, since it was considered to be a bad acting vehicle. However, it gave Ristori the chance to challenge previous actresses who had chosen this role like Cushman, Glyn and O'Neill. As Bianca, Ristori was considered to be superior than previous actresses in the same role, as the *Illustrated London News* remarked:

Ristori's difference arises in the third act from her predecessors. Her force, fervour and tide of passion know no ebb until the curtain drop.<sup>94</sup>

A more demanding and direct challenge to the English tradition came from her *Macbeth* which opened at the Lyceum Theatre on 3 July and remained the highlight of the tour. This role would later become central to Ristori's career and is amply documented in Ristori's Archive and often referred to in her *Memoirs*. Ristori may have felt the appeal of including Shakespeare in her repertoire at a time when he was still largely an unknown quantity to the Italian stage and moreover she may have been trying to establish a link between the English and Italian acting traditions. Ristori's task was very difficult as to mid-nineteenth century English

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94. *Illustrated London News*, 27 June 1857.



audiences, the role of Lady Macbeth was "consecrated to the memory of Mrs Siddons and (...) such actresses as the late Mrs Warner, Miss Cushman and Miss Glyn [who] have left a deep impression on our minds",<sup>95</sup> and "[audiences] were anxious to see how the great Italian tragedienne treads in the steps of Mrs Siddons."<sup>96</sup> In her *Memoirs* Ristori maintains that following her successful tour in England the year before she had been urged, "by most distinguished literary men", to add Lady Macbeth to her repertoire but, at first, she considered the play to be beyond the range of a foreign travelling company "because of want of scenery and of necessary numbers of actors". However, she decided to stage the play since she was reassured that in England also it was often necessary to adapt Shakespeare's plays to the production requirements of the time.<sup>97</sup>

Ristori's investigation of the role started from Lady Macbeth's final scene and she first studied and performed the sleepwalking scene. Delivered as a set-piece isolated from its dramatic context this scene could attain a high melodramatic quality and provide a vehicle for the actress to display her virtuosity. Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene was first performed in Paris a month before the English debut with the whole play and remained one of the main assets of Ristori's repertoire, often delivered as an afterpiece or encore. Ristori's work on the role is detailed in her *Memoirs*.<sup>98</sup> She argues that the character created great difficulties and required the greatest diligence due to her "fierce and almost demonic nature." Lady Macbeth fell into the category of utterly hideous characters whose nature was morally unacceptable, but due to its

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95. *Sunday Times*, 5 July 1857.

96. *Musical World*, 11 July 1857.

97. Ristori, *Memoirs*, p.55.

98. Ristori, *Memoirs*, pp.254-271.



extraordinary power it exerted a strong appeal on the actress engaged in revealing the demonic nature and nearly pathological character. Ristori approached Lady Macbeth as a study in psychology with an almost scientific exactness. She created a character with a disturbed personality and focused on two main features: excessive ambition guiding Lady Macbeth through the first half of the play, then growing signs of distress leading to a final remorse. According to Ristori, Lady Macbeth was a bloody-minded virago:

A gigantic conception of perfidy, dissimulation and hypocrisy (...) difficult to credit with any of the feelings of ordinary humanity.<sup>99</sup>

This description is similar to Siddons' "true and perfect image of the greatest of all natural and moral depravations— a fiend-like woman."<sup>100</sup> As Rosenberg suggests, the archetypal image of Lady Macbeth as "Terrible Woman" was dominant in the character's stage history at the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>101</sup> It was introduced by Siddons who had seen in Lady Macbeth

A woman in whose bosom the passion of ambition has almost obliterated all the characteristics of human nature.<sup>102</sup>

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99. Ristori, *Memoirs*, pp.254-55.

100. James Boaden, *Memoirs of Mrs. Siddons*, 2 vols (London: 1827), II, p.139.

101. See Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Macbeth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p.160.

102. Sarah Siddons, 'Remarks on the Character of Lady Macbeth', in *Actors on Acting* ed. by Toby Cole and Helen K. Chinoy (New York: Crown, 1949), p.142.



Siddons created her role on three main theatrical points: remorseless thirst for power leading to a "deplorable depravation of all rational knowledge"; a subsequent sense of affliction and then final dejection and remorse.<sup>103</sup> Ristori used Siddons' interpretation as a starting point due to the lack of an immediate reference in the Italian stage tradition, with the single exception of Verdi's operatic version of the play which came out in 1847 and was based on a libretto written by Francesco Maria Piave which gave considerable importance to Lady Macbeth.<sup>104</sup> As Rosenberg suggests, in following Siddons' model, Ristori set her interpretation in the "Terrible Woman" mould which suggests a fierce and strong-minded character and which had already been staged in London by Charlotte Cushman a decade before Ristori. Cushman's interpretation was noted especially for her tendency to tower over Macbeth as "an archetypal mother would have loomed over a son."<sup>105</sup> Rosenberg suggests that the Siddons-Cushman-Ristori line, which centred on the dehumanization of the character, was gradually superseded by the "Loving Wife" pattern where Lady Macbeth was a home-loving wife devoted to her husband. Introduced by the German actress Rosalie Nouseul, this softer conception was fully developed by Helena Faucit and Ellen Terry, who as Victorian actresses, might have felt the urge to transfer more womanly traits to the character of Lady Macbeth.<sup>106</sup> Rosenberg suggests that Ristori succeeded in adding complexity to the role. The fierce, manly aspects were complemented by a clever quality, adding to the key note of command the subtle note of 'Italianate' cunning. This could be considered to have been a major element in Ristori's construction of her

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103. Siddons, 'Remarks', p.142.

104. See Francesco M. Piave, *Macbeth. A Melodramma in Four Acts* (London: 1850).

105. Rosenberg, p.148.

106. Rosenberg, p.148.



role as testified by her frequent use of byplay and counterscenes which were meant to suggest a visually vivid expression of the character's deceitfulness. Her use of byplay is explained in her analysis of the banquet scene in the third act:

In this act (...) Lady Macbeth can give much additional force, if not by words, at any rate by her skilful byplay.<sup>107</sup>

Ristori describes how on the arrival of one of Banquo's murderers "she affects gaiety with her guests and simultaneously casts fearful glances to her husband", for fear that the guests should notice Macbeth's uneasiness and discover his crime. Ostentatious gaiety is stressed when she utters the lines "My lord, you do not give the cheer, the feast is cold..." and acquires an accent of reproof aided by the power of "significant glances" in the lines "My worthy Lord, our noble friends do lack you..". The model for the scene is to be found in Siddons:

Lady Macbeth affects to resume her wonted domination over her husband (...) assuming the utmost composure (...) she entertains her wondering guests with frightful smiles, with overacted attention, and with fitful graciousness; painfully, yet incessantly, laboring to divert their attention from her husband.<sup>108</sup>

The close of the scene is a crucial turning point in Lady Macbeth's development which Ristori again conceived according to Siddons' model, as is illustrated by these remarks from Siddons:

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107. Ristori, *Memoirs*, p.264.

108. Siddons, 'Remarks', p.144.



The golden round of royalty now crowns [Lady Macbeth's] brow, and royal robes enfold her form; but the peace that passeth all understanding is lost to her forever, and the worm that never dies already gnaws her heart(...) under the impression of her present wretchedness, I, from this moment, have always assumed the direction of countenance and manners which I thought accordant to such a state of mind (...) She is no longer the presumptuous, the determined creature, (...) we behold for the first time striking indication of sensibility, nay tenderness.<sup>109</sup>

Ristori envisages a very similar scene:

From the moment of the guests' departure I dated the commencement of the mental prostration of their unhappy hostess, which ended at last in total derangement (...) I let it be seen how remorse had begun to torment me. I showed that I experienced a feeling of pity for Macbeth rendered by my means the most miserable of men.

The emotional tension focused on Lady Macbeth and built up all through the play found its peak in Lady Macbeth's final scene, a bravura piece that "tries the power of an actress to the utmost." Siddons' Lady Macbeth became a "wretched creature" haunted by dreadful images. Ristori re-enacted in her slumber the feigned representation of Duncan's murder as if emerging from the deepest zones of her perturbed consciousness:

I came upon the scene looking like an automaton, and dragging my feet after me as though they were weighted with lead; mechanically I placed my lamp upon the table, taking care that all my movements should be

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109. Siddons, 'Remarks', p.143.



slow and deliberate, and thus indicate the numbness of my nerve power. My eyes were wide open, but fixed and glassy.. they looked and yet they saw nothing. I breathed hard and with difficulty. My whole appearance, in fact showed a state of extreme nervous agitation produced by the disorganization of my brain.<sup>110</sup>

Then she would try to wash off the blood from her hands constantly repeating the attitude of holding water in the hollow of her hands and convulsively rubbing them. Her state of deeply disturbed sleep was reinforced by half stifled gasps and continuous heavy breathing. Siddons had envisaged a similarly distressed image:

The wasted form (...) wan and haggard countenance, the starry eyes glazed with everburning fever, remorse and on their lids the shadows of death (...) her ever restless spirit wandering in troubled dreams about her dismal apartment.<sup>111</sup>

Ristori rendered "the high perturbation in nature" of what she saw as a clinical case. It was a showcase of the illusionistic, mesmerising power of the *grande attore* which impressed the audience greatly as a young Eleonora Duse remarked after witnessing Ristori's performance:

Ristori played the sleepwalking scene with classic dignity, combined with a particularly curious realism; composed, clear, wearing a crown on her head, her eyes staring fixedly at the footlights,

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110. Ristori, *Memoirs*, p.266-268.

111. Siddons, 'Remarks', p.145.



and in between sentences she was breathing heavily as though still asleep, *she was actually snoring.*<sup>112</sup>

In the production the greatest importance was given to Ristori and even Macbeth was confined to a secondary role. The text, translated by the Italian writer Giulio Carcano and readapted for the stage by a Mr Clark had been reduced to four acts, and all the cuts were made in order to emphasize Ristori's role. A playtext— probably meant for the English audience who could buy it on the night of the performance and use it as a libretto in order to follow the action— lists all the abridgements made for Ristori's production. The outline enables the audience to realize at a glance that the performance centres on Lady Macbeth who actually "usurps the stage at the expense of Macbeth."<sup>113</sup> However, a mutilated Shakespeare which had been tailor-made for the star actress did not seem to disappoint the expectations of the audience who were aware that they had come to see Ristori and that the performance would dominate the production. *The Standard* argued that there was

Far less alteration in the acting copy than imagined (...) Neither the public nor the critics would have regretted any amount of abridgement or compression in the scenes or the dialogue, as long as it did not interfere with Lady Macbeth.<sup>114</sup>

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112. "[Ristori] faceva la grande scena del sonnambulismo con una dignità classica, mista ad un particolare di curioso verismo: composta, chiara, con la corona in capo, gli occhi fissi ai lumi della ribalta: e, tra una frase e l'altra, un lieve rantolo di dormiente: russava!", From *Colloqui con la Duse*, in Silvio D'Amico, *Tramonto*, p.56. English translation in 'Eleonora Duse and Adelaide Ristori: a Tale of Two Actresses', ed. and trans. by Susan Bassnett, *Women and Theatre. Occasional Papers*, 1, 1-18 (p.18).

113. *Shakespeare's tragedy of Macbeth adapted for Madame Ristori and her Italian Dramatic Company*, promptbook, Genoa, Civico Museo Biblioteca dell'Attore, fondo Ristori.

114. *Standard*, 4 July 1857.



Even her habit, typical of a *grande attore*, of surrounding herself with a mediocre, hurriedly arranged cast was barely regretted.

The production was grandiosely mounted. The stage director's manual held in Genoa, at the *Museo dell'Attore*, gives an account of the stage business and lists scenery, cast, and props. The number of supers listed is remarkable:

Twenty ladies in waiting of Lady Macbeth  
 Thirty armed Scottish noblemen  
 Forty Scottish soldiers  
 Twelve attendants,<sup>115</sup>

The effort made to produce a grandiose performance in line with the spectacular style of Ristori's productions is clear. Stills of Ristori as Lady Macbeth show the richness of the costumes which had been fashioned after a barbarian style and were based on famous paintings, such as a portrait of Lady Macbeth at the Manchester Exhibition and one of Lady Macduff at Edinburgh.<sup>116</sup> The richly embroidered costumes of the first acts emphasized Lady Macbeth's queenly nature while the shroud-like nightgown, similar to that worn by Siddons, anticipated her downfall.<sup>117</sup>

The actress's interpretation was considered to be a high histrionic achievement and was enthusiastically received:

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115. *Indicatore dei manifesti, scenari e comparse della drammatica Compagnia Italiana diretta dall'Esimia Adelaide Ristori, Marchesa Capranica del Grillo, M.A., f.R.*

116. For these references see Kate Field, *Adelaide Ristori: A Biography* (New York: Gray, 1867), p.52.

117. "The quantity of white drapery in which the actress was enveloped(...)almost *shroud-like* clothing". Boaden, *Siddons*, II, p.146.



All the character's qualities (...) this queen of actresses depicts with a potency of conception and a power and delicacy of execution.<sup>118</sup>

Reviewers greatly praised her statuesque poses, her native grace of action, her melodious voice speaking "in the tongue of the sweet south":

She shines the most in the parts that afford her a statuesque exhibition. She loves to drop into a pose at the conclusion of an act and to let the curtain fall on a sculptural epigram.<sup>119</sup>

Her ability in suiting the action to the word was repeatedly emphasized and suggested to many critics images from sculptural scenes in *Medea*, such as the leopard simile, one of the high points in *Medea*, which was echoed in the "pantomime of passion" in act I of *Macbeth* when she delivers the lines: "I have given suck...etc." Here she would look down at her bosom and gradually closing her open hand she "seemed to tear the infant from her nipple and dash it to the earth."<sup>120</sup> The intertextual link suggested by the *grande attore* style was a proof of her skill in framing her acting within a precise gestural code which made her distinctive acting recognizable behind or beyond each character.

Critics also focused their attention on the extent to which she departed from the native stage tradition and argued that her "energetic, new and beautiful illustrations" would set a new model and "merit the

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118. *Morning Post*, 4 July 1857.

119. *Musical World*, 11 July 1857.

120. *Lady's Newspaper*, 4 July 1857.

attention of the English actress."<sup>121</sup> They stressed that she was capable of realizing "by every look and every tone (...) our dreams rather than our memory, necessarily imperfect and poorly pieced by pictures of the Siddons."<sup>122</sup>

Only a few reviewers were disappointed with Ristori's performance. The critic of the *Athenaeum* regarded her undertaking as "a dauntless thing." Ristori as Lady Macbeth was compared to Siddons—"Melpomene self, with Shakespeare for her stage manager" and was considered to be inferior to Siddons, in such a way that she could not be entitled any longer to retain "the style and title as Tragic muse."<sup>123</sup> The *Atlas* protested against the "heresy" of sacrificing Macbeth and focusing the play on Lady Macbeth and considered Ristori to be "incapable of representing the higher class of tragic emotions."<sup>124</sup> Another critic disapproved of the habit of staging Shakespeare in foreign languages as the actors could only grasp the meaning of the action but would fail to understand the author's subtle meanings, and remarked that "Macbetto and Macduffo sound oddly."<sup>125</sup>

But Ristori's 'Italianate' conception of the role was considered to be her key quality according to the majority of her critics:

*Donna Macbetto* is the proper Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth—not a substitute created by the Italian brain.<sup>126</sup>

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121. *Illustrated London News*, 11 July 1857.

122. Unidentified cutting, 6 July 1857, M.A., f.R..

123. *Athenaeum*, 11 July 1857.

124. *Atlas*, 11 July 1857.

125. Unidentified cutting, 11 July 1857, M.A., f.R..

126. *Musical World*, 11 July 1857.



Twentieth-century criticism has emphasized the importance of Ristori's Shakespeare and that of her fellow Italian Shakespeareans.<sup>127</sup> Italian grand manner applied to Shakespeare was enthusiastically received on the international stage, though some roles were supposed to be more suitable to Italian interpretation than others. Salvini's Othello and Ristori's Lady Macbeth were extremely successful as they offered great opportunity for displaying fierce and untamed southern traits whereas Hamlet, who was felt to be a purely Anglo-Saxon character, was more difficult to accept outside a codified tradition. Most of all it was "the stock-in-trade of the grand theatrical style" which was still reigning everywhere in Europe and America in the late nineteenth century, which appealed to foreign audiences. The success of Ristori and the other Italian Shakespeareans has been quite acutely summed up by Smith:

There was some measure of peeping at celebrities. But there was undoubtedly much more than that(..) The megalomaniac stars (...) sought by deep study and passionate application to convey every emotion of their text, piling up effective detail to create a deeply felt and completely enthralling image of the hero and heroine(...) Theirs, in performance, was Romantic Shakespeare *par excellence*, sacrificing the balance of the play in a highly theatrical celebration of the myth it projected.<sup>128</sup>

*Mary Stuart, Queen Elizabeth, Marie Antoinette*

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127. On the Italian actors and Shakespeare see Carlson, *The Italian Shakespeareans*; and Claudio Meldolesi, 'Alla ricerca del grande attore: Shakespeare e il valore di scambio', *Teatro Archivio*, 2 (1979), 114-127.

128. Christopher Smith 'The Italian Players and Shakespeare', *New Comparison*, 2 (1990), 141-147, (pp. 145-146).

Lady Macbeth was probably Ristori's most famous role in England thanks also to her virtuoso performance in English in her last tours. During her last tours, however, she directed her choice mainly towards historical characters and would eventually confine her repertoire to Queens. The turning point came during her fifth tour in England, in 1873, when she presented a rather limited repertoire of Queens: *Medea*, *Mary Stuart*, *Queen Elizabeth*, and *Marie Antoinette*, plus the sleepwalking scene in *Macbeth* performed for the first time in English. The novelty is quite striking when we compare it to her previous English tour in 1863 when she had also performed *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, *Rosmunda*, *Leah* and *Norma*. Her last two tours in 1882 and 1883 were again centred on queens.

*Queen Elizabeth*, *Mary Stuart* and *Marie Antoinette* were historical plays, a genre very popular with audiences at the time of Italian unification as historical plays usually hinted at patriotic ideals. As Buonaccorsi suggests, this genre suited a "*teatro di grandi ideali*" (theatre of grand ideals) and was central to the *grande attore* theatre, insofar as the historical setting framed the actor's performance<sup>129</sup>. Historical events provided the background for the development of the character's life.

Ristori had staged Schiller's *Mary Stuart* using Enrico Maffei's Italian translation, during her first engagement as leading lady of the Compagnia Ducale di Parma, but she discovered the attraction of historical plays for the *grande attrice* later on in her career and in 1853 she included *Queen Elizabeth*, a play by Paolo Giacometti not originally written for her but which soon become one of her major roles. Later she commissioned Giacometti to write historical plays which were centred on a famous female historical

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129. Eugenio Buonaccorsi, 'La Maria Antonietta di Paolo Giacometti, nelle lettere dell'autore ad Adelaide Ristori', *Bollettino del Museo Biblioteca dell'Attore*, 4 (1973), 3-121.



character. *Marie Antoinette* could be considered the main achievement of the Ristori-Giacometti partnership because Ristori had an active role in the writing process often suggesting added scenes and cutting others, especially those which were designed for lesser characters, even if these cuts might affect historical accuracy.

Historical plays were seen by Ristori as pageants, based on a loose dramatic structure which provided "a well lubricated theatrical machine" as Buonaccorsi puts it, "allowing scope for the display of the performer's pantomimic skill and her gripping power on the audience."<sup>130</sup> If, on the one hand, the complexity of a consistent historical development was greatly reduced, on the other, Ristori felt that the loose paradigmatic structure might allow room for incidental passages that could turn out to be theatrical. Elements of theatricality are already included in the script and later enhanced in performance, as testified by recurring tableaux at the end of each of the five acts of *Marie Antoinette*.<sup>131</sup> These tailor-made plays gave the greatest importance to the performer who also provided the cohesive element in the sequence of *frescoes*.

*Marie Antoinette* is a good example of a star-actress vehicle. The play opens with a prologue where high expectations are built up for the entrance of the Queen of France; in the four acts of the play along with episodes which tend to highlight important events of the character's life, like Marie Antoinette's long imprisonment, incidental events are included which are not relevant to the historical reconstruction of the play and are meant either as showpieces for the actress — for instance the whole prologue focused on the luxury of court life — or as moments of comic relief.

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130. Buonaccorsi '*Maria Antonietta*', pp.15-16.

131. See Paolo Giacometti, *Maria Antonietta. Regina di Francia* (Milan: Barbini, 1874).

It could be argued that the roles of queens enabled Ristori to create a codified type of womanhood on stage, behind which the actress's stage persona could be recognized. A repertoire of queens allowed Ristori to bridge the gap between her role as an actress and that of Marchioness Capranica del Grillo as the underlying assumption was that, though historically and psychologically different, her queens were all reflections of a precise feminine ideal. They appear to be overwhelmed by clashing emotions and divided between the private and public spheres, though Ristori tended to emphasize the private and most intimate aspects of her characters' lives. Her key to the characters tended to superimpose on them a metatype, that of the Queen who is a projection of the Player queen.

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Ristori's artistic studies shed light on the process whereby she constructed her characters. Her aim was to unravel the main psychological traits of each character. In her study of *Mary Stuart*, Ristori wanted to suggest an image of a wronged woman, a victim of "undeserved cruelty and persecution" and of "her own extraordinary beauty, her own personal fascination." Therefore she decided she should study the character carefully in order to resemble:

A woman in whom much suffering and many persecutions had not been able to extinguish strength of mind.

An important feature in the construction of her character appeared to be the use of external objects whereby the character could be visually identified, as testified by the recurring image of the crucifix in *Mary Stuart*:



While I uttered the words I lifted my eyes to heaven and pressed to my lips the crucifix I wore attached to a rosary at my side.

I seized the crucifix hanging at my side and pressed it to my heart.

I [kneeled] with my crucifix clasped in my hand.<sup>132</sup>

At the end of the play *Mary Stuart* appears for the last time, before facing her execution and she "embraces the cross".

As Buonaccorsi suggests, a key element of Ristori's acting when portraying her queens was to have the character suddenly shift from one mood to the other in a way that could be easily grasped by the audience.<sup>133</sup> Ristori states that her roles were created through a sequence of sudden changes, for instance, in the fifth act of *Mary Stuart* when the Queen's sign of royalty is conveyed only "through the dignity of her carriage."<sup>134</sup> A sudden shift of mood was also resorted to in the study of *Queen Elizabeth*. In the third act of the play during Elizabeth's interview with Essex Ristori emphasized, by changing the intonation of her voice and the expression of her face, "the sudden transition from severity to great and generous impulse."<sup>135</sup>

In Ristori's reading *Mary Stuart* was essentially a pathetic character, whereas *Elizabeth* was an awe-inspiring character:

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132. Ristori, *Memoirs*, pp.140-171.

133. Buonaccorsi, 'Introduction' in Paolo Giacometti, *Teatro scelto* (Genoa: Costa & Nolan, 1983), p.23.

134. Ristori, *Memoirs*, p.167.

135. Ristori, *Memoirs*, p.285.

Whose regal dignity, haughtiness, transcendent abilities, great powers of dissimulation, consummate hypocrisy, and love of absolute authority were strangely combined with the weaknesses and frivolity of a woman.<sup>136</sup>

This role was understood by Ristori to be an opportunity for an actress to give "proof of her power", insofar as it had the qualities of both "the experienced leader, full of martial enthusiasm" and "of womanly weakness" allowing for a little comedy in the second act.<sup>137</sup>

During her English performances the press pointed to the star vehicle quality of Ristori's queens and her unique ability in rendering great characters in history. As the *Athenaeum* remarked:

The dramas of Signor Giacometti are written with an express view of supplying Madame Ristori with characters adapted to display the variety and range of her talents (...). They are sets of historic or quasi-historic scenes more than dramas. The number of years occupied in the action of *Marie Antoinette* or *Elizabeth* is greater than in most of Shakespeare's historical plays.<sup>138</sup>

Again in the *Athenaeum*:

Almost alone among artists, Madame Ristori gives a complete interpretation of great characters of history. She seems to possess them in such manner as air inflates a balloon, filling every portion and stretching them to the utmost bounds of elasticity.

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136. Ristori, *Memoirs*, p.272.

137. Ristori, *Memoirs*, p.277.

138. *Athenaeum*, 28 June 1873.



Every part is adequately filled; each gesture and movement, each inflection of voice, seems due to long and intelligent study, and the whole leaves the impression of supreme and masterly art.<sup>139</sup>

However, the excessive length and the number of merely ornamental and illustrative speeches in her historical plays was often lamented by the press, especially with reference to *Marie Antoinette*, which consisted of a prologue, four acts and an epilogue lasting nearly five hours, during which Madame Ristori's role was "to depict the various phases of passion and feeling by which the very human Queen Marie Antoinette was swayed."<sup>140</sup> However, though the play was believed to be "a drama of conversation rather than of action and more fitted for the closet than the stage", Ristori was capable of a "most skillfully drawn and coloured portrait of the heroine."<sup>141</sup>

Critics also pointed out Ristori's efforts to instil both a womanly and a queenly quality in her queens. The *Athenaeum* suggested that as Mary Stuart she "is a queen and a woman too, whose womanly frailties and jealousies break through restraints". In her "anti-historical" interview with Elizabeth she alternates moments of "queenliness and womanliness" and in the closing scene she conveys "grace of bearing, tenderness and serenity. Queenly dignity was never better expressed."<sup>142</sup>

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139. *Athenaeum*, 18 October 1873.

140. *Era*, 29 June 1873.

141. *Illustrated London News*, 28 June 1873.

142. *Athenaeum*, 21 June 1873.

In the 1882 season Ristori appeared at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane with only two plays in English. The following year she toured the provinces with an extended repertoire of queens in English. The first full length role attempted was Lady Macbeth after a short essay of the sleepwalking scene in 1873. The event was favourably received as Ristori's foreign accent was perceived to be "less noticeable" than that of other foreign actors such as "Mr Fechter, Mlle Stella Colas and other artists, who have essayed to deliver the English language."<sup>143</sup> The *Times* remarked that "never was a foreign accent so completely reduced to a minimum as in the case of Madame Ristori", who succeeded in realizing "all the mental horrors of the situation without betraying any sense of the fetters imposed upon her by a language to which she is unaccustomed."<sup>144</sup>

In 1882 her attempt to perform a whole play in English was viewed as a remarkable feat "at a period in life when most are content to rest upon their laurels", and on the whole her command of the language was appreciated to the extent that in some speeches "the idea that the speaker is employing an alien tongue is dismissed from the mind."<sup>145</sup> However, in highly dramatic passages her speech tended to be indistinct:

In passages of excitement and volubility (...) she become indistinct and powerless to impress her audience. When she reads the letter from Macbeth every word and syllable are heard; but this distinctness wears away in the dagger scene, it almost disappears in the hurry and confusion of the banquet, but it

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143. *Athenaeum*, 25 October 1873.

144. *The Times*, 30 October 1873.

145. Unidentified cutting, 1882, London, Theatre Museum, Ristori file.



reappears with welcome charm throughout the sleepwalking scene.<sup>146</sup>

Though her acting was still considered "as finished as ever, "she was manifestly not in the enjoyment of her fullest powers, her voice having lost a great deal of its beauty and her gesture something of its easiness"<sup>147</sup> and critics pointed out they would have preferred a selection of scenes "instead of the entire tragedy being inflicted on the audience."<sup>148</sup>

The second role presented in English was *Elizabeth*, which after *Medea* was "better known in London than any other of her impersonations."<sup>149</sup> The critic of the *Daily Telegraph* argued that it would have been a great disappointment to English audiences if Ristori had concluded her engagement without appearing in the character of Elizabeth, because during her previous tours

This minute study of senility, this strange mixture of domineering will and smothered love, this combination of ill-disguised tyranny and smouldering hate stood apart as a thing which once seen was not easily to be forgotten.

This critic believed that Ristori's performance was still a success and that its old spirit managed to survive "the ravages of time."<sup>150</sup>

The English performance of Elizabeth was considered by many a critic to be more demanding than that of Lady Macbeth

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146. Unidentified cutting, 1882, T.M., R.f..

147. *St. James Gazette*, 6 July 1882.

148. *Illustrated London News*, 8 July 1882.

149. *Daily Chronicle*, 15 July 1882.

150. *Daily Telegraph*, 15 July 1882.

who only appears in nine out of the twenty-seven scenes of the play, whereas Elizabeth is almost always on the stage.

The highest point of her performance was Elizabeth's death scene where Ristori gave proof of the "actress she once was". The *Daily Telegraph* maintained that the death scene was not the same as in former years, but nonetheless

Far better than much seen nowadays, even in realistic scenes. There is nothing trivial or commonplace about it. It is a great woman who is dying. Madame Ristori's Queen Elizabeth is always a great woman.<sup>151</sup>

As this review seems to suggest, in the 1882 tour Ristori projected the image of an ageing actress who could no longer perform coquettish roles but could still be admired in her larger than life queens:

[Ristori's] Elizabeth possesses (...) a splendid obstinacy, a defiant determination never to be thwarted in anything, and a grandeur of personal presence that inspires awe. Art alone can render such an Elizabeth even tolerable and by means of art Ristori is every inch a Queen.<sup>152</sup>

Towards the end of her career the stage seems to substitute a throne as some of her pictures show which again resemble pictures of the aging Queen Victoria. As suggested earlier, Ristori could bring onto the stage her status as Marchioness del Grillo and emphasize, through her repertoire of Queens, the nobility of her profession.

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151. *Daily Telegraph*, 15 July 1882.

152. *Daily Telegraph*, 15 July 1882.



(iv) Ristori's Legacy to the English Theatre and the English Ristori Memorial

Ristori's tours in England cover a period of twenty-six years during which the English theatre underwent remarkable changes. When she made her debut in the mid-1850s efforts were made in order to uplift the social status of actors and introduce new forms of bourgeois theatre, such as Robertson's cup and saucer plays. Even traditionally sensational pieces like melodramas, the staple diet of early Victorian playgoers, were penetrated by more realistic elements. Native dramatic literature was considered inadequate and the stage was overwhelmed with French-derived plays and popular melodrama. Actors had a pivotal role in early Victorian theatre and their acting was often of the "mob" or "seismic" kind, "charming the eye and stunning the ear."<sup>153</sup> The 1860s are considered by theatre historians to be the starting point of modern theatre. Under the impact of the Bancrofts' management and their house playwright Robertson English theatre was progressively encircled by a "gilded picture frame" and became a proper entertainment for the bourgeoisie.

The weakness of the English stage gave foreign star actresses greater opportunities to shine. Ristori's reappearance on the English stage as *Medea* excited the following comment:

To London audiences, in the present deep want of the natural stage and the indifference of our metropolitan managers, representations like that of *Medea* suggest the loftiest standard of histrionic art and tend to create a public taste in the desirable direction.<sup>154</sup>

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153. Lewes, p.152.

154. *Illustrated London News*, 20 June 1863.

The picture frame which was gradually being introduced in theatre architecture helped to establish a strong link between the stage and the audience. Ristori consolidated a process already started in sentimental theatre whereby the audience mirrored themselves in the life of the stage and engaged a relationship with their actors. Her success was also due to the lack of extraordinary native female performers, as Giorcelli suggests.<sup>155</sup> There were indeed a few famous "player queens" like Ellen Tree and Helena Faucit. However, as discussed earlier, the restrictions imposed on the performers of the recognized theatre for the sake of respectability limited their potentialities. More revolutionary figures, like Marie Wilton and Mme Vestris, came from the lower stage tradition of burlesque and opera comiques and stepped into theatre management, but on the whole British actresses were still plagued by the antitheatrical prejudice and their theatrical scope in terms of repertoire and acting technique appeared to be more limited than that of Ristori, "the great exotic and real athlete of the stage."<sup>156</sup> Her successful interpretation of Lady Macbeth as a strong-minded virago was quite beyond the scope of English actresses as Reilly has shown with reference to Ellen Tree who, as a model of the perfect Victorian lady, failed to be convincing "when she played the roles of women who did not live up to her own moral code - women such as Lady Macbeth."<sup>157</sup>

Ristori's acting and appearance were often perceived as sensual and she seemed to bring in an element of 'southernness' and exoticism as early reviews pointed out:

Never was actress more earnestly, passionately, gracefully Southern than Madame Ristori— Southern in

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155. Giorcelli, p.96.

156. Shaw, *Our Theatres*, I, p.161.

157. Reilly, p.26



the rapidity and variety of her changes— Southern in an instinct for the beautiful, which harmonizes gestures the most hazardous and effects the most daring.<sup>158</sup>

Exoticism as a main feature of the foreign actress was introduced by Ristori and was often mingled with the appeal of her support for the Italian nationalistic cause. However, Ristori also seemed to participate in the growing concern for respectability on account of her regular and respectable private life. Having challenged and eventually defeated the ill-fated Rachel, Ristori remained the unrivalled queen of the European stage for at least two decades championing her romantic and melodramatic style, perceived as new when compared to Rachel's old neoclassical style. Writing at the turn of the century on the "drama of today", Clement Scott discussed contemporary theatre against the "theatre of yesterday", where a special place was held by Ristori:

Medea (...) Elizabeth and Deborah were magnificent performances. Hers was the realistic and coldly classical school and when she first came to England she woke up the slumbering artistic feeling which had been almost dead for years.<sup>159</sup>

George Henry Lewes, however, found major faults with Ristori's acting style and, above all disliked

That common mistake of conventional actors, an incongruous *mixture* of effects(...) With great art [Ristori] employs the traditional conventions of the stage, and reproduces the effects which others have

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158. *Athenaeum*, 7 June 1856.

159. Scott, *Yesterday and Today*, II, p.459.

produced, but does not deeply move us, because not herself deeply moved.<sup>160</sup>

Much as he admired "her exquisite grace, the mournful beauty of her voice, the flash of her wrath" still he felt that she did not possess "the *something* Rachel had," and argued that the main difference between the two actresses consisted in the difference between talent and genius:

Ristori is universally spoken of as the rival of Rachel: many think her superior. The difference between them seems to me the difference between talent and genius, between a woman admirable in her art, and a woman creative in her art. Ristori has a complete mastery of the mechanism of the stage, but is without the inspiration necessary for great acting.<sup>161</sup>

It is undeniably difficult to come to a full appreciation of Ristori's reception in England on account of the different rules which set the conventions of seeing of the age. Critics and audiences seemed to be drawn to her ability of blending realism with bravura display.

It would seem, nonetheless, that during the three and a half decades in which she visited London the response to her acting and her representation of womanhood changed. In the 1850s the key element appeared to be the novelty of her acting style which, though it was still centred on points, in the grand manner style, was nevertheless perceived to be very natural. The *Saturday Review* remarked:

This rapid succession of distinct points of acting, this resolution of a general idea into the energetic exhibition of its parts, is the leading peculiarity of

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160. Lewes, pp.145-148.

161. Lewes, pp.144-148.



Madame Ristori's performance. It is successful with her simply because it is natural. She belongs to a nation accustomed to express every play of passion by gesticulation. She of course has subordinated the national habit to the requirements and possibilities of art, and every word and movement has been evidently most carefully studied.<sup>162</sup>

Successive tours were mainly seen as a consolidation of her previously acquired fame and a refinement of her art and Ristori was still seen as a model to be set against the numbness of the English stage, as the *Era* suggested:

Ristori conquers still, noble in voice, grand in attitude and most powerful. The variety and passion of the artist keep even an audience enthralled which may be entirely ignorant of the actual words delivered.<sup>163</sup>

Her grand manner acting was felt to be in decline, as a consequence of the rise of "the drawing room style", to which English theatregoers were becoming more and more accustomed. However, as the critic of the *Illustrated London News* suggested, Ristori's "grandest style of histrionic art" could "counteract the tendency which [the drawing room style] possesses to degrade the drama."<sup>164</sup>

Between Ristori's fifth and sixth tours a major event stirred the London stage, namely Sarah Bernhardt's English tour which brought about new elements in star acting and a novel repertoire suggesting a different ideal of womanhood. Furthermore Modjeska and Desclée, who progressively moved away from romantic acting, had also successfully appeared on the London stage. As I have shown, in the 1880s Ristori

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162. *Saturday Review*, 11 July 1857.

163. *Era*, 15 June 1873.

164. *Illustrated London News*, 28 June 1873.

responded to changes in style and repertoire brought about by other international actresses, her juniors, with a reinstatement of her *donna mondo* image encoded in an all-queen repertoire and her efforts to be set beyond history were manifest in her choice of performing in a foreign language. The queenly Ristori had a different appeal on audiences and critics suggested that a striking parallel might be drawn between her reappearance on the stage and "the pathetic picture of the declining years of the last of the Tudors."<sup>165</sup> Her last stage pictures strongly emphasize the final transformation with the recurring presence of queenly postures which are also - quite strikingly - retained in her private photographs. By interpreting characters drawn from history or legend that she had chosen in the final years of her career, she could neutralize their moral un-acceptability and by means of her art, she could transfigure even their most hideous features.

It is clear that what was perceived as new at the time of her debut in 1856, in terms of acting and construction of a peculiar type of womanhood on stage, could only be viewed as a relic of a past tradition in the early 1880s when set against the complexity of a changing theatre scene, as a review of her English *Macbeth* illustrates:

To the younger members of the present generation of playgoers Madame Ristori was but a name until Monday. It is nineteen years since the great Italian tragedian was last with us, and during the interim our stage has been steadily slipping away from its old traditions. It will not, therefore, be surprising if her style of histrionic art is considered strange and even unsympathetic by a public grown accustomed to the finicking prettiness of the modern drama. Again, time has moved on with Madame Ristori (...) and an actress of three score years can hardly retain in their full

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165. *Society*, 19 July 1882.



perfection the powers which won her admiration and fame in the prime of her life.<sup>166</sup>

Ristori's statuesque style influenced other actresses such as the American Kate Bateman and Genevieve Ward who became famous in England in two of Ristori's main roles, *Lady Macbeth* and *Medea*.<sup>167</sup> The fact that Ristori held a high place in the English theatrical pantheon is testified by a memorial celebration in 1908 in London, two years after her death. On 30 November during a special matinée performance at His Majesty's Theatre, major English actors paid their tribute to the late Italian actress. Genevieve Ward performed *Lady Macbeth's* sleepwalking scene and delivered an 'Ode' meant as a final celebration of the actress of bygone days:

The young ne'er knew, the old have half forgot  
The larger methods of that distant day,  
when she was passion's mouthpiece...<sup>168</sup>

The event was a unique tribute to the foreign actress who, to nineteenth-century English audiences was

In truth, the Siddons of Italy—a less statuesque, less goddess-like, more womanly, more human Siddons—not quite so much of a genius, and more of a *grand dame*.<sup>169</sup>

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166. *Weekly Dispatch*, 8 July 1882. Ristori's previous appearance in England actually dated back to 1873, nine and not nineteen years earlier.

167. Ristori's legacy to the English stage is discussed in Aston, 'Ristori's *Medea*'.

168. Louis N. Parker, 'Ode to Adelaide Ristori' from the programme of the Adelaide Ristori Memorial Matinée, 30 November 1908, T.M., R.f..

169. Frederic Whyte, *Actors of the Century* (London: Bell, 1898), p.130.

## 5. ELEONORA DUSE'S ENGLISH CAREER

(i) *Le deluge* that never was. Eleonora Duse on the English stage in the 1890s.

The appearance of Eleonora Duse on the English stage in May 1893 was hailed as "an upheaval, a wholesale destruction of ideals which would bring about a sense of dissatisfaction with the old order of things."<sup>1</sup> Early reviews of her performances tended to point to the novelty of her acting and the complexity and new life she was able to give even to those roles that were felt to be dated, as was the case with Marguerite Gautier, her debut role, held by many to be "inadequate", "a well-worn story" but nonetheless still able to "live in large and stately grace" in Duse's impersonation.<sup>2</sup>

After her debut, critics suggested that she could hardly be compared to any native or foreign living actress and could only be likened to Rachel, who had played in England half a century earlier, "not only in physical resemblance, but also in method, identical in many points"<sup>3</sup> or, as the critic of the *Times* suggested, to Aimée Desclée "whose subtle and indefinable charm she seems to possess."<sup>4</sup> The *Pall Mall Gazette* went as far as to say that Duse's appearance in England had marked "an epoch-making evening in the story of the contemporary stage."<sup>5</sup> The presence of Duse as a foreign international actress on the English stage in the last decade of the nineteenth century could be assessed in the light of the turn of the century debate on theatre which

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1. 'Signora Eleonora Duse at the Lyric Theatre', *Theatre*, 1 July 1893.

2. 'The Marguerite Gautier of Eleonora Duse', *Theatre*, 1 June 1894.

3. 'Eleonora Duse', *Saturday Review*, 27 May 1893.

4. *Athenaeum*, 3 June 1893.

5. 'Signora Duse at the Lyric', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 25 May 1893.



touched on different crucial issues such as the actor's art, the status of dramatic literature and the vexed question of fin de siècle gender representation on the stage.<sup>6</sup> These issues seemed to receive more attention towards the end of the century, when Duse started to perform in England, than in the previous decades, the years of Ristori's English tours.

The early 1890s stand out as crucial years in a momentous decade for the English theatre. Woodfield has placed the transitional age of the English stage between 1889 and 1914, suggesting that though transformations had been operating throughout the century, a climax was achieved only at the turn of the century. As he argues, only in the last decades did successive attempts towards realism and socially relevant plays which questioned the playbill usually chosen by profit-minded theatre managers, give their most interesting and long lasting results.<sup>7</sup> The main features of fin de siècle theatre can be traced in the development of psychological realism in the form of the new drama along with the emergence of modern critical actors. In most cases, these actors were not the offspring of traditional theatrical families and their efforts to boost the production of modern plays posed a serious threat to the authority of actor managers whose choice would usually fall on traditional genres such as melodrama, farce and Shakespearean adaptations.

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6. For a general introduction to late Victorian theatre see, among recent works James Woodfield, *Theatre in an Age of Transition* (London: Croom Helm, 1984); Ian Clarke, *Edwardian Drama* (London: Faber, 1989); Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Actors and their world are discussed in Michael Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor* (London: Croom Helm, 1978); Michael Sanderson, *From Irving to Olivier: A Social History of the Acting Profession in England 1880-1983* (London: Athlone Press, 1984); Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women* (London: Routledge, 1991) but see also articles published in *The Theatre* between 1893-95 for a contemporary perspective.

7. Woodfield, p.viii.

The vitality and complexity of the English theatre in the 1890s, torn between mainstream tendencies and independent ventures, is reflected in Duse's early tours in England. On the one hand, as an Italian actress, she projected the image of a world famous star, like Rachel, Ristori and Bernhardt before her, enhanced by her choice to perform in fashionable theatres like the Lyric in 1893, the Daly's in 1894 and Drury Lane in 1895 during the summer season which was traditionally assigned to foreign stars. On the other hand, she challenged mainstream theatre by adopting a distinctive acting style more akin to that of modern intellectual actors and including in her repertoire controversial plays like Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, alongside more traditional star vehicle roles.

Reviews and commentaries of Duse's performances offer therefore an interesting cross-section of the debate around the fin de siècle theatre, where the role of the actor and his/her art seems to be paramount. The opening of an article on Duse published in the *Theatre* provides a good starting point for an evaluation of Duse in England and sets the standard for later judgements:

After Henrik Ibsen, not le deluge but La Duse. The one is the complement of the other. With aims and aspirations probably as wide asunder as the poles, their methods are identical(...) Like Ibsen, [Duse] effects a revolution with every performance.<sup>8</sup>

This article focuses on what could be viewed as the two main poles of theatre discussion at the turn of the century: Ibsen the new playwright and Duse the new actress for the new drama. It seems to suggest that the ground-breaking role of Ibsen's theatrical legacy in England could now be taken over by Duse. A comprehensive discussion of Ibsen's reception in England goes beyond the scope of this thesis

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8. *Theatre*, 1 July 1893.



and has already been the object of many a scholarly work.<sup>9</sup> However, it would be worth referring briefly to some of the major events in the early history of Ibsen's reception in England insofar as they shed light on the English theatre scene in which Duse made her debut.

It is widely acknowledged that Ibsen had made a breakthrough in dramatic literature by fathering what soon came to be known as the New Drama. In England the social issues tackled in his plays became a topic for conversation among intellectuals in socialist circles, like that gathered around Eleanor Marx, daughter of Karl, who as early as 1886 arranged a private reading of *A Doll's House* in London. Since the first English production of *Pillars of Society* under the title *Quicksand* at the Gaiety Theatre in 1880, Ibsen's plays had given impetus to amateur and independent theatres which were trying to offer alternative productions to the dearth of the mainstream theatre: A tongue-in-cheek account of the theatre scene in England before Ibsen is given by Granville-Barker in his article 'The Coming of Ibsen'. The author maintains that in the early 1880s English drama was "a rather childish affair", the only worthy achievement of dramatic literature in the previous decades having been Robertson's cup-and-saucer domestic drama which was now in decline. The genre's chief legacy to the theatre "seemed to be a gentlemanly generation of actors, and if cup-and-saucer comedy was still served, the china was now second-hand, and apt to look rather chipped and shabby."<sup>10</sup> The pre-Ibsen London scene appeared as a "parochial puppet show of a theatre", totally unprepared for "that hammer blow of Ibsen's method" and dominated by Irving who "in his little kingdom of the Lyceum

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9. See especially Tracy C. Davis, 'Critical and Popular Reaction to Ibsen in England 1872-1906' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 1984).

10. Harley Granville-Barker, 'The Coming of Ibsen', in *The Eighteen-Eighties*, ed. by Walter de La Mare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), pp.159-196, (p.162).

would have nothing to say to modern drama at all", while the rest of the London playbill would be limited to melodrama and "ridiculous deodorization from the French". Although the coming of Ibsen "struck fear into the hearts of the parents and guardians of the yet invertebrate British drama", his plays seemed nonetheless to open up new perspectives for both drama and theatre.<sup>11</sup>

I shall only briefly trace the stage history of Ibsen's plays in England, mainly for the purpose of highlighting two main issues instrumental to my analysis of Duse in England. The first centred on the problem of acting Ibsen and, on a more general level, acting the new drama which Ibsen had championed. The second regards the relationship between theatre criticism and Ibsen which is of great interest when discussing theatre reviews and commentaries in the Ibsen and post-Ibsen era in England. Both issues tended to affect the appreciation of Duse in England.

As has been argued,<sup>12</sup> Ibsen's plays required a critical actor, as actors formed on a staple diet of gentlemanly melodrama or society drama requiring little analysis and mainly stock characterization, could hardly be entrusted with Ibsen's characters who were "living and breathing entities not conventionally embellished with the ordinary stock attributes of stage figures, but conceived and developed with a masterly knowledge of the intricacies of human nature."<sup>13</sup> The role of actresses in championing Ibsen's cause has been widely acknowledged especially a new breed of intellectual actresses who, as has been suggested, had

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11. Granville-Barker, p.187.

12. On the subject of acting Ibsen see Gay Gibson Cima, 'Discovering Signs: The Emergence of the Critical Actor in Ibsen', *Theatre Journal*, 35 (1983), 5-22 and Tracy C. Davis, 'Acting in Ibsen', *Theatre Notebook*, 39 (1985), 113-123.

13. Herbert Waring, 'Ibsen in London', *Theatre*, 1 October 1894. Waring played the part of Torvald Helmer to Janet Achurch's Nora in the first London production of *A Doll's House* in 1889.



shown dissatisfaction with the idea of acting as a pictorial art, the theatre as a gilded and smug picture stage and the actress aspiring to be a living picture. To them acting meant essentially: "experiment, discovery, stepping, as it were, outside the picture",<sup>14</sup> which seemed possible thanks to Ibsen and all his "glorious actable stuff", as pointed out by Elizabeth Robins, probably the actress most committed to the Ibsen cause in England.<sup>15</sup> From the actresses' standpoint, Ibsen set a divide in English fin de siècle theatre insofar as most actresses like Ellen Terry or Madge Kendal, with whom the "recognized theatre" tended to be identified, showed hardly any interest in his plays, unlike those working on the margins who enthusiastically promoted him. By including *A Doll's House* in Italian during her first tour in England and more New Woman roles in later tours, Duse investigated the possibilities offered to an actress by "the new glorious actable stuff" and was therefore often compared with English intellectual actresses. By the same token, the Ibsen cause stirred theatre criticism so much as to produce two factions, the Ibsenites and the Anti-Ibsenites. After the first article on Ibsen published in England by Edmund Gosse in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1873, the pro-Ibsen campaign was a major issue in the work of William Archer, a pivotal figure in English theatre criticism. I agree with Postlewait in attributing to Archer—also probably the most fervent admirer of Duse among English critics—the most important role in championing Ibsen's cause in England, as his extensive collection of essays on Ibsen, his substantial body of translations, alongside his active role in early

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14. See Mary T. Heath, 'A Crisis in the Life of an Actress: Ibsen in England' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Massachusetts, 1986), pp.411-12.

15. Elizabeth Robins, *Ibsen and the Actress* (London: Hogarth, 1928), p.31.

productions of Ibsen's plays show.<sup>16</sup> Shaw also played an important role in "distilling the quintessence of Ibsenism" and relating the work of the Norwegian playwright to the early feminist cause which eventually led him to a close collaboration with Ibsenite actresses.<sup>17</sup> The Anti-Ibsenites found an authoritative spokesman in Clement Scott, editor of the *Theatre*, who dismissed the work of the Norwegian playwright as "hideous" and his characters as "a congregation of men and women without one spark of nobility in their nature, men without conscience and women without affection, an unlovable, unlovely and detestable crew."<sup>18</sup>

It could be argued that criticism of Duse tended to reflect these two opposing schools. The Ibsenites would see in her a model, quintessential actress, incarnation of the New Woman, and, as Shaw suggested, the only artist of the stage able to produce in the spectator

That indescribable disturbance of the soul(...) a sensation from which I have usually found myself perfectly safe in London theatres except when Duse is at large here.<sup>19</sup>

Clement Scott, on the other hand, only expressed occasional lukewarm praise for some of her roles and often

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16. On the role played by William Archer in introducing Ibsen in England see Charles Archer, *William Archer* (London: Allen, 1931) and Thomas Postlewait, *Prophet of the New Drama: William Archer and the Ibsen Campaign* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986). Most of Archer's critical work on Ibsen is collected in Thomas Postlewait, ed., *William Archer on Ibsen: The Major Essays, 1889-1919* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1984).

17. See Shaw, *Quintessence*. The relationship between Shaw and Ibsenite actresses is discussed in Margot Peters, *Bernard Shaw and the Actresses* (New York: Doubleday, 1980).

18. *Theatre*, 1 July 1891.

19. Shaw, *Our Theatres*, I, p.230.



frowned upon others, dismissing her art-disguising art and maintaining that if she but

Had the emotional power of a Rachel, a Desclée, a Favart, or a Bernhardt, she would be the greatest actress who ever lived; as it is, she is the greatest and the coldest stage scholar.<sup>20</sup>

During three successive tours from 1893 to 1895, which mark the early history of her presence on the English stage, Duse reinforced her image as a world famous actress, established her international repertoire, and enlivened theatrical debate. As I have already pointed out, the most important comments emerging from reviews and commentaries of her interpretations centre around three main issues: the novelty of her acting; the quality of her repertoire; the forging of her image as an international actress, where she is often compared with other actresses— Sarah Bernhardt being the one most usually referred to. A fourth element seems to encompass the previous three and affect the whole reception of Duse, namely the issue of the New Woman and to what extent Duse managed to transfer onto the stage "the shadowy sides of the female", in Susan Casteras' words, seen as the hallmark of the New Woman.<sup>21</sup>

## (ii) Duse's Early Career

Luigi Rasi, contemporary biographer of Duse, suggests that the two main achievements of the young Duse were her Naples debut in the title role of Zola's naturalistic play *Teresa Raquin* in 1879 when she first emerged as a "promessa

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20. *Illustrated London News*, 12 May 1894. The Ibsenite response to Duse by Archer and Shaw as opposed to the Anti-Ibsenite stance of Clement Scott is discussed later on in this chapter.

21. Casteras, p.12.

*di grandezza*" (potential greatness) and three years later in Turin, her interpretation of Lionette in Dumas' *La Princesse de Bagdad*, a role which had been "previously interpreted by Sarah Bernhardt and was now functioning as a springboard for Duse's rise to "*grandezza vera*" (true greatness).<sup>22</sup>

As Teresa Raquin Duse played a major role for the first time, taking over the legacy of the actress Giacinta Pezzana who had successfully interpreted the role of Teresa in the past and was now, in the Naples production, bequeathing the centre stage role to a younger actress, while withdrawing to the lesser role of old mother Raquin. Duse saw Pezzana as a model, much as Ristori had found her master and model actress in Carlotta Marchionni. As Roberto Bracco put it, Pezzana was the only actress "to nourish Duse's genius".

She stood out as an advocator of naturalistic acting, shunning affectation and hardly relying on her feminine charm at all.<sup>23</sup>

As a pupil of Pezzana, Duse deliberately moved further beyond the classical grand manner acting of Marchionni and Ristori who had both built their fame mainly on historical dramas, centred on noble characters whose portrayal demanded ample, magnified gesture. In her own acting technique, Duse seemed to move a step further from Pezzana as well who, according to Rasi, still shone out in classical pieces where a regal posture was required, whereas Duse chose to interpret what were essentially modern characters and give

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22. Luigi Rasi, *La Duse*, 2nd edn ed. by Mirella Schino (1901; Rome: Bulzoni, 1986) p.21.

23. Roberto Bracco, 'Giacinta Pezzana', *Il Corriere di Napoli*, 19 February 1899.



voice to the anxiety of modern life and uneasiness of the generation of the 1890s.<sup>24</sup>

Duse's second landmark, her success in *La Princesse de Bagdad* in 1881, has been reassessed by more recent criticism and viewed less as a definitive achievement than as an important moment in the creation of a Duse mythology. According to Rasi, Duse managed to play this role against the will of her *capocomico* Cesare Rossi who feared it would be a failure. He maintains that it was originally meant as a tribute paid by a promising Italian actress to the already famous Sarah Bernhardt who had just opened a season in Italy. However, Duse's unexpected triumph as Lionette won her fame as the greatest Italian actress.<sup>25</sup> Rasi's affectionate recollection of the episode is, however, tinged with fictional traits. Sarah Bernhardt made her debut in Italy a year later and what is more, the role of Lionette had already been played by other Italian actresses before Duse.<sup>26</sup> However, the episode is important insofar as it shows Duse for the first time as the only Italian actress who could stand up to Sarah Bernhardt, with whom she would engage in a "battle at the summit" in the following three decades. Furthermore, her stubborn determination to stage a difficult play such as *La Princesse de Bagdad*, shows Duse's inclination towards the depiction of the wayward woman, which would form the mainstay of her repertoire. Her interpretations of *Teresa Raquin* and the *Princesse* took place at the beginning of a crucial decade during which Duse came to define her distinctive acting style centred on the "*faccia convulsiva*" [distorted face], as Rasi put it.<sup>27</sup>

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24. Rasi, *La Duse*, pp.23-24.

25. Rasi, *La Duse*, pp.24-27.

26. Cesare Molinari, *L'Attrice divina. Eleonora Duse nel teatro italiano fra due secoli* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1985), pp.57-60.

27. Rasi, *La Duse*, pp.27.

Another important event was her change of position within the hierarchy of her theatrical company, not a minor event in the career of an Italian actress trained in the traditional "child of the stage" system, where the step from *attrice giovane* to *seconda donna* and then to *primadonna* was fundamental. After her early years as *attrice giovane* (*ingénue*) in strolling companies Duse gained her early successes as *seconda donna* in the fairly renowned company of Cesare Rossi, a position she held for two years before her first engagement as leading lady in 1882. Molinari has argued that henceforth her major interpretations, though within the range of a *primadonna*, often retained some of the *seconda donna* qualities.<sup>28</sup> The *seconda donna* role was originally conceived as antagonistic to that of the leading lady and though already present in tragedy and historical drama, such as the character of Elizabeth in *Mary Stuart*, tended to gain importance only after the decline of tragedy and the corresponding rise of domestic and society drama where to an usually amorous wife played by the leading lady, a fiendish *seconda donna* was opposed, often in the role of the husband's mistress.

This role gained a recognized status within the theatrical system for the first time in 1853 when the actress Daria Cutini Mancini signed her contract with the Royal Sardinian Company in this role. It was born out of the transformation of the traditional *commedia dell'arte* role of the *servetta* (maiden) and tended to be charged with fewer comic traits in order to encompass more clearly the characteristics of the emancipated woman, now a pivotal character in modern comedies.<sup>29</sup> This role progressively came

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28. Molinari, *Attrice*, p.60.

29. See G. Costetti, *La Compagnia Reale Sarda e il teatro italiano* (Milano: Kantowicz, 1893), p.202. A detailed, full-length description of the late nineteenth-century Italian touring company, with a list of all possible *ruoli*, from leading actors to extras is in Sergio Tofano, *Il teatro all'antica italiana e altri scritti di teatro*, ed. by Alessandro Tinterri (Rome: Bulzoni, 1985), pp.28-37.



to exert a strong fascination on actresses to the extent that authors like Dumas and Sardou would create major female characters with the quality of *seconde donne*. By choosing a gallery of negative heroines Duse took part in the progressive centre stage movement of the woman with a past that, as has been argued, culminated in the new woman roles of the 1890s that would form the core of her international repertoire.<sup>30</sup>

Parallel to her rise to the position of leading lady in the 1880s her acting technique seemed to undergo considerable changes and become more complex and multifaceted. The young Duse excelled in vivid portrayals, effective acting with powerful gestures. Rasi details her extraordinary body language: her distressed look, her sudden shift from pallor to blushing, her trembling lips, her limbs shaken convulsively which particularly suited to the representation of "hysterical characters" which Duse was particularly fond of, as they offered scope for the expression of "sheer wickedness" on stage.<sup>31</sup> Schino has shown that in the 1880s her acting consisted of a combination of low acrobatic elements filtered through Pezzana's naturalistic method and a tendency to passivity that Duse had shown since her youth when she would manifestly slow down and weaken the action. This would result in a rather complex style made of elements that often clashed.<sup>32</sup> However, her prevailing keynote seemed to have been loud and impressive acting with a few hints of a more nuanced style. Rasi goes as far back as Duse's interpretation of *Giulietta* when she was only fourteen to trace an effective interplay with flowers, an element often

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30. Holledge, p.1.

31. Rasi, *La Duse*, pp.27-28.

32. Mirella Schino, *Il teatro di Eleonora Duse* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992). On Duse's acting technique see chapter II '*Come lavorava la Duse*', pp.55-100.

recurring in the older Duse where she fully exploits the use of "expressive objects"<sup>33</sup> and adopts more delicate tones.<sup>34</sup>

The progressive shift towards toned-down modes which tended to characterize Duse's acting at the time of her early international career favourably impressed her English reviewers who praised her "abhorrence of posing and point-making"<sup>35</sup>, "her shrinking from anything cheap and vulgar" and her conception of a performance as "the very negation of tableaux."<sup>36</sup> As "a Victorian playgoer", Kate Terry Gielgud was impressed by Duse's innovative method, which aimed at representing nature by avoiding artificiality, but at the same time found her peculiar body language difficult to reckon with:

Duse has ugly hands and uses them badly; they are always in evidence, she has a trick of touching everything she passes on the stage: a chair, a table, the window curtains. One and all receive a sort of caress or become a means of support, and a favourite gesture of hers is that of throwing her arms backwards and slightly upwards with her fingers clenched.<sup>37</sup>

The quality of Duse's acting in the 1890s is described as follows by Knepler:

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33. The term was introduced by Pudovkin. Here I refer to its uses as suggested in John Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp.83-85: "Once objects have entered into social relations and narrative actions, they are imbued with the same spirit as the humans who touch them."

34. Rasi, *Duse*, pp.15-16.

35. 'Signora Duse at the Lyric Theatre', *The Times*, 25 May 1893.

36. 'Eleonora Duse', *Saturday Review*, 27 May 1893.

37. Kate Terry Gielgud, *A Victorian Playgoer*, ed. by Muriel St. Clare Byrne (London: Heinemann, 1980), pp.13-14.



The great new effect that she brought to the international stage in the early 1890s was a unique method of acting that gave the impression of being unpremeditated and yet carefully thought out, spontaneous and yet clearly a momentous, conscious achievement[...] a supremely economical method devoid of great gestures [...], completely natural and true to life.<sup>38</sup>

Shaw's contemporary analysis of Duse's method compared it with the historic/heroic acting of Salvini and Ristori and advocated that in the "after Wagner and Ibsen theatre" Duse was the first actress to apply the method of the "great school" to modern parts and modern conceptions of old parts. Her apparent avoidance of point-making was actually an ability to integrate the points of the old school into a continuous whole, "at which stage the actress appears to make no points at all."<sup>39</sup> As Stokes suggests, Duse's performances were created as reactions to events rather than actions,<sup>40</sup> exemplified by her unobtrusive entrances or rather, as a contemporary critic suggested, "her failure to make an entrance" and her tendency to act upstage "creating attention little by little".<sup>41</sup>

Her efforts seemed to be directed towards microscenes, which were not relevant to the unfolding of the plot but were meant as a sort of comment on the action by the actress, hence her minute movements and long stretched pauses which gave the impression she was "resting" on stage.<sup>42</sup> Signorelli has pointed out that her manifest

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38. Knepler, p.188.

39. Shaw, *Our Theatres*, I, pp.146-147.

40. John Stokes, 'The Legend of Duse', in *Decadence and the 1890s*, ed. by Ian Flechter (London: Arnold, 1979), pp.151-171.

41. *Saturday Review*, 27 May 1893.

42. Schino, *Duse*, p.91.

passivity and attention to details stemmed from carefully thought out acting which would tend to go beyond the surface meaning of the text and build the character from within.<sup>43</sup> Her technique seemed to pave the way to the "system" later devised by Stanislavsky because, like the Stanislavskian actor, Duse would put a strong emphasis on the psychological development of the character and attempt to reveal the character's thoughts by exploring the sub-text of the play. However, unlike the Stanislavskian actor who had to rely on a precise system in order to create the role and become the character, Duse spontaneously became her character "by means of an immediate understanding just as natural as breathing."<sup>44</sup>

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The 1880s stand out as a significant decade in Duse's career as far as her choice of repertoire went. This probably originated in her fascination for French actresses which also accounted for her leanings towards *seconda donna* roles. Tebaldo Checchi, Duse's husband from 1881 to 1885 lamented the fact that Duse took great pleasure in reading the lives of French actresses Dorval, Rachel, and Desclée, whom he saw as having a bad influence upon her as they drove her in her early *primadonna* years towards a repertoire of unwomanly women.<sup>45</sup> Desclée, especially, who was the foremost expression of *nervosité* on the French stage, seems to have been a major influence on Duse. In her pursuit of a "verità

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43. Olga Signorelli, *Vita di Eleonora Duse* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1962), p.39.

44. Signorelli, p.40.

45. Letter from Eleonora Duse to Francesco D'Arcais, 27 August 1885. Quoted in Gerardo Guerrieri, *Eleonora Duse. Nove saggi*, ed. by Lina Vito (Rome: Bulzoni, 1994), p.21.



*sensazionale*", sensational truth as Guerrieri puts it, different from the lifelike *tranche de vie* typical of Italian realism, Duse must have felt the fascination of Dumas' distressed heroines, scandalous and perverse as they must have appeared to the French bourgeois public in an interpretation charged with *nervosité* such as Desclée's.<sup>46</sup> Affinity with the French actress was acknowledged, if not deliberately sought, by Duse herself who often referred to her in her letters.<sup>47</sup> In a letter to Marquis D'Arcais she said that she was most touched by the comparison often being made between her and Desclée and in another when referring to the character of Lidia in *Une Visite de noces* she described the sense of pleasure and fulfillment in giving life once more to the French actress by interpreting Lidia.

Furthermore, as early as 1882 her repertoire as *primadonna* in Cesare Rossi's company consisted essentially of Dumas and Sardous' plays originally made famous by Desclée's interpretation, as the following excerpt from a letter shows:

In the Rome season I played 7 *Odette*, 4 *FrouFrou*, 2 *Dames aux camélias*, 2 *Fernande*, 3 *Scrolline* and I have played 6 *Femmes de Claude* to date.<sup>48</sup>

Similarities between the two actresses become clearer when we consider the impact they both had on London audiences during their English tours where Desclée's reception in the 1870s strikingly anticipated that of Duse. Stokes has described how London audiences were thrilled by

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46. Guerrieri, *Duse*, pp.26-27.

47. See letter from Eleonora Duse to Francesco D'Arcais, 13 September 1882. Quoted in Molinari, *Attrice*, p.61.

48. "Nella stagione di Roma ho avuto 7 *Odette*, 2 *Signore delle camelie*, 2 *Fernande*, 3 *Scrolline* e, a tutt'oggi, 6 *Mogli di Claudio*" Letter from Eleonora Duse to Gennaro Minervini, 28 October 1882. Quoted in Molinari, *Attrice*, p.61.

Desclée's realistic depiction of the wayward woman and greatly admired her power of living the part, of becoming the character, a quality later often praised in Duse as well. The quality of *nervosité* of this Ophelia-like character still cast in the stereotypical romantic mould, as Stokes puts it in his analysis of Desclée's modernity, would later inform Duse's acting as well and give them both the imprint of modern actresses.<sup>49</sup>

In her early years as *primadonna* Duse played an important role in revitalizing the standard repertoire of an Italian theatre company. At the time the repertoire of an average company would normally consist of a few classical pieces (mainly Goldoni, Alfieri and Shakespeare), along with farces and French adaptations, but new plays, usually from France, would also be regularly added. Duse basically followed this tradition but often encouraged daring and unconventional plays like Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Giacosa's *La signora di Challant* and *Tristi Amori*, "whose intimate agony breathes something of the spirit of the Scandinavian drama"<sup>50</sup>, and the most famous Sardou's and Dumas' roles. In her foreign tours the repertoire would be more limited and suited to the tastes of each nation, but some roles would be regularly included especially those which allowed Duse to focus essentially on her character. These plays encouraged a unique amount of space for female characters and Duse would eventually go on to establish a close relationship with such

mediocre, but wholly modern literature, devoid of absolute values but expressing the anxiety, uneasiness and rebellion of modern neurotic womanhood.<sup>51</sup>

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49. See Stokes, 'Desclée', p.366.

50. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 25 May 1893. The author of the article regrets that Duse did not include the work of this "Italian Ibsen" in her first tour in England.

51. Molinari, *Attrice*, p.67.



However, Duse's interpretations of traditional roles of the French school seemed to mark a breakthrough, thanks to her thoroughly new conception of well-known roles. Signorelli reports comments of the Russian press after Duse's debut in Russia in 1891 which emphasized Duse's novel approach to a fairly stereotypical repertoire:

[She] seemed to break a tradition of splendid costumes, heavy make-up and all those trivial effects connected to the representation of a once-charming-then-fallen woman: In Duse's interpretation any accidental or merely theatrical effect disappeared, in order to reveal profound psychological conflicts and a deep understanding of the human soul.<sup>52</sup>

The modernity of Duse as reflected in her repertoire was a vexed issue in Ristori's appreciation of Duse's art. Ristori acknowledged her outstanding talent and argued that she was greater than any contemporary actress, but at the same time expressed disappointment for her gallery of wayward women:

Duse has created her own style, a conventionalism that fascinates and by which she is, essentially the Modern Woman with all her complaints of hysteria and anaemia and their consequences, and therefore she has very wisely introduced into her repertoire a whole collection of these abnormal types, with all their weaknesses, neuroses, all their outbursts and languors, such as Marguerite Gautier (a play she performs sublimely, unsurpassably), such as *Fedora* or

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52. Signorelli, p.77.

*La Femme de Claude*, or the protagonist of Sudermann's *Heimat*.<sup>53</sup>

To Ristori this repertoire lacked variety and prevented Duse from exploring characters of a different nature. Ristori's attack against modernity was restated in a letter to the actor Tommaso Salvini and sounded like a general dismissal of the young generation of actors whose most outstanding representative was Duse:

Would you like to know what I think about the new style of our theatre? It is absolutely dreadful! Neurosis is an illness that is devastating the human brain at the close of our century (...) I am of the modest opinion that the current style of acting is false and mere acrobatics! and that we should be proud of having been who we were, followers of truth and the portrayers of great art!<sup>54</sup>

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53. "La Duse si è creata da sé la propria maniera, un convenzionalismo tutto suo che affascina, per cui essenzialmente, è la Donna Moderna con tutte le malattie di nevrosi, d'anemia, e con tutte le sue conseguenze; e perciò nel suo repertorio ha introdotto, con molta sagacia, una completa collezione di questi tipi anormali, con tutte le loro debolezze, fantasticherie, i loro scatti, e i loro languori, come la Margherita Gautier (dramma che essa rappresenta in modo sublime, inarrivabile) da Fedora alla Moglie di Claudio, alla protagonista della Casa paterna di Sudermann" Letter from Adelaide Ristori to Giuseppe Primoli published in *Le Gaulois*, 26 May 1897, quoted in Mirella Schino, 'La Duse e la Ristori', *Teatro Archivio*, 8 (1984), 123- 181, (p.41). English translation in 'Eleonora Duse and Adelaide Ristori; A Tale of Two Actresses', ed. and trans. by Susan Bassnett, *Women and Theatre. Occasional Papers*, 1, 1-18 (p.15).

54. "Volete sapere quello che io penso di questa nuova interpretazione dell'arte nostra? Molto male. La nevrosi è la malattia che sconvolge il cervello umano in questo fin di secolo!(...) Io, modestamente, sono d'avviso che l'attuale forma di interpretazione è falsa ed acrobatica! e che noi dobbiamo essere orgogliosi di essere stati quello che fummo, seguaci della verità e della manifestazione della grand'arte". Letter from Adelaide Ristori to Tommaso Salvini, 29 December 1899, in Schino, 'Ristori', p.169. English translation, 'Duse and Ristori', p.16.



Ristori's comments could be viewed as a defence of grand manner acting which suited the portrayals of tragic characters and a rejection of the stage as a place where the uneasiness of the modern woman could find an outlet.

### (iii) The International Stage

In the 1880s two major events occurred in Duse's career: in 1885 she performed for the first time to foreign audiences in America and two years later after the dissolution of Rossi's company, Duse took the decision to manage her own company. In her new position of *capocomico* she might have felt the fascination of foreign tours and the urge to launch her international career, in the footsteps of all major Italian actors who had toured abroad extensively managing their own companies. In the 1880s foreign tours could still attract actors as a source of good profit to be usually re-invested in successive ventures as testified for instance by Ristori's last foreign tour in 1883 when the actress was aged sixty-one. Duse set off for her first tour abroad in 1885 when, as leading lady of Cesare Rossi's company she gave a series of performances in Latin America. On their return to Italy in 1886 the company dissolved and at the end of the year Duse announced her stepping into management with her own "Compagnia Città di Roma". The new role of theatre manager entailed that the choice of repertoire, casting, the supervision of *mise en scène* would become entirely her responsibility. The repertoire of Duse *capocomico* consisted of a wider range of plays if compared to the seasons under Rossi, although her interest would still be mainly directed to French plays.

It is with the Russian tour in 1891, however, that Duse's international career was properly launched. The great success enjoyed in Russia, and the following year in Austria and Germany prior to her London debut in 1893, built her international fame and started to create a legend based

on the widespread belief that her art could not be confined within the realm of acting, as there was nothing in her performances that could be called acting, no theatrical poses or invented, contrived effect.<sup>55</sup>

On her English debut, expectations were high following her success in the rest of Europe and in America, much as Ristori's debut season in 1856 had managed to arouse great interest after her triumphant Parisian tour. A complimentary review in the *Pall Mall Gazette* announcing her forthcoming English debut in an Italian literal version of *Camille*, points to her remarkable success in other European countries and expresses the wish that she should be well received in England as well.<sup>56</sup>

Before her first London tour it would appear that little was known about Duse in England. The first document I have been able to trace on Duse in English is a 1885 article published in the *Athenaeum*, written by M.K. Macmillan after witnessing some of Duse's performances in Rome when she was still in Cesare Rossi's company. It is interesting as it draws attention to issues which would emerge in reviews during Duse's English tours, such as the comparison with Sarah Bernhardt and Ellen Terry. At the same time, however, it attempts to highlight features of Duse's method that gradually disappeared in criticism of her English performances, due to an overriding concern with the creation of a somehow magnified image of Duse as an actress able to do without any technique. Furthermore, references to her prospective tour in Latin America hint at the potentiality of Duse as an international actress who could be welcomed especially in English speaking countries. The article suggests that in her interpretations of modern French pieces and Goldoni comedies, Duse seemed to have defied the whole tradition of Italian acting à la Ristori, and maybe all

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55. See William Weaver, *Duse: A Biography* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984).

56. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 25 May 1895.



~~and Goldoni comedies, Duse seemed to have defied the whole tradition of Italian acting à la Ristori, and maybe all dramatic tradition.~~ In spontaneity she could be likened to Ellen Terry, whereas "in her faculty of riveting an audience by a state of high nervous tension", she resembled Bernhardt. However, comparison with the French actress is considered a rash one, since Duse was still tied to provincial mannerism and could not boast the stage training of the Conservatoire, the greatest theatre school in Europe. But unlike Bernhardt she had not developed one side of her art only, namely "the ghastly and macabre" in dramatic art. Her apparent failure to represent "sheer violence", and "those bitter exasperations of wounded egotism and lived caprice", was compensated by her ability to portray human tenderness by striking the note of "disinterested emotion and moral sympathy". As an anticipation of one of the most recurring comments on Duse's art made by English reviewers in the 1890s, this critic points out that if Bernhardt always betrayed "traces of her school and its tradition of autorité", Duse went to

The most daring lengths in self-effacement. Her stillness is absolute. She is plantée là by the difficulties and complications of circumstance; or again she shrinks almost out of the focus, and glimmers, as it were, through clouds of distance and trouble(...) Even what is exaggerated in Italian gesture has in her a sort of anomalous grace, and preserves the richness and geniality of nature.

The article suggests that she best expressed her talent in almost soubrette parts in light comedies by Goldoni, which alongside a "sprinkling of French adaptations" should form her repertoire in English speaking countries, which unlike "the modest Eldorado offered by Latin-speaking countries", would grant a proper international debut to

"this artist of the rarest quality to appear in Europe since the death of Aimée Desclée."<sup>57</sup>

#### (iv) Duse's Fin de Siècle Roles on the English Stage

During her first tour in England Duse included *La locandiera*, a traditional Goldoni role which had also featured in Ristori's foreign repertoire as it apparently provided actresses with a wide scope for expression of *coquetry* in the light comic genre. Other roles would include *Fedora*, *Divorçons* and *La dame aux camélias* of the Sardou-Dumas school, an Italian version of *Antony and Cleopatra* adapted and translated by poet and librettist Arrigo Boito, Verga's naturalistic play *Cavalleria Rusticana* and Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, all performed in Italian. In 1895 when Duse appeared for the third time before English audiences, Archer published a fairly detailed article on her in the *Fortnightly Review* suggesting a division into two groups of Duse's roles presented in England up to then. The first was formed by characters requiring differentiation by temperament, and would normally be worked entirely from within, such as Nora, Marguerite, Cesarine while the second would demand external composition and differentiation by external traits. These are *Mirandolina* (*Locandiera*) and *Santuzza* (*Cavalleria Rusticana*), "among the most marvelous of Duse's creations". All these roles are perceived as "facets of her natural self", while *Cleopatra* "would demand a sort of inflation of her personality, a climbing upon stilts, a historic pose, for which she has, perhaps, neither the skill nor the will."<sup>58</sup> Later on she would tend to focus on "roles from within" at the expense of those from without. A few decades earlier Ristori had also progressively limited

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57. M.K. Macmillan, 'Eleonora Duse-Checchi', *Athenaeum*, 23 May 1885.

58. William Archer, 'Eleonora Duse', *Fortnightly Review*, 64 (1895), 199-207.



her repertoire by selecting those plays which could enhance her queenly image and cater for the tastes of mid-Victorian audiences. Duse tended, on the other hand, to inscribe her roles within a fin de siècle representation of womanhood and offer an insight into different types of "unwomanly women", such as the *révoltée*, the soiled dove, the woman with a past.

Schino argues that she created her repertoire as a "*gabbia da sfondare*", a cage to be broken out of and Duse herself often admitted her suffering and the utter disgust for her interpretations:

I feel the falseness (...) of the productions I play in (...) *Magda, An Ideal Wife, La Femme de Claude, Camélias*. Not so much *The Lady of the Camélias*! There is still a golden thread linking the fake beads of that drama. But the rest!... I feel humiliated in portraying the people I am forced to portray. And often my contempt grows so bitter and the rebellion of my conscience so strong that it seems to me that even my strength as an actress is ebbing away.<sup>59</sup>

Duse eventually managed to go beyond the fin de siècle repertoire when she started collaborating with Gabriele D'Annunzio and later in her career when she limited her repertoire to only a few plays by Ibsen and the two Italian playwrights Marco Praga and Tommaso Gallarati Scotti. However, her gallery of unwomanly women seemed to provide her with the best vehicle for her expression. As Pirandello put it in his interesting analysis of Duse as "an actress in

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59. " *Sento tutta la parte falsa, caduca (...) delle produzioni in cui recito (...) Magda, la Moglie ideale, la Moglie di Claudio, Camélie. Manco male la Signora delle Camélie! Vi è ancora un filo d'oro che tiene legate le perle false di questo dramma. Ma il resto!... Sono io stessa umiliata nei panni delle persone che sono costretta a raffigurare. E spesso diventa così grande il disgusto e così fiera la protesta della mia coscienza che mi pare debba venir a mancare anche la forza fisica dei miei mezzi di attrice*" Letter from Eleonora Duse to Rastignac, 1898. Quoted in Molinari, *Attrice*, p.74.

search of an author", Duse had been able to perform a miracle with plays of little artistic value:

The grandeur of Duse, in the eyes of her early audience, was the power she had of breathing the breath of life into many characters that had been barely outlined by their authors(...) Duse gave a perfect form to the crude unmoulded clay her old repertory offered her.<sup>60</sup>

Among the roles presented to English audiences in the 1890s, four seem to stand out, first because they stirred a great response in both the public and the critics by often suggesting a comparison with other famous actresses and second because they form an exemplary cross-section of Duse's repertoire at the turn of the century. These are Marguerite Gautier and Nora in *A Doll's House* included in her 1893 tour, Magda in *Casa paterna (Heimat)* performed in 1895 and Paula Tanqueray in *La seconda moglie (The second Mrs Tanqueray)* included in the 1900 tour.

#### The Soiled Dove: *Marguerite Gautier*.

*La dame aux camélias* by Dumas fils came out in 1848 and was first produced at the Theatre du Vaudeville in 1852 starring Eugenie Doche in the role of Marguerite Gautier. Since then this role had been a sort of test for leading ladies in France as well as in other countries, who tended to interpret this character from different perspectives: Sarah Bernhardt created an eminently elegant princess-like figure; Virginia Marini, one of the first Italian Marguerites, saw in her a lady of good breeding fallen by

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60. Luigi Pirandello, 'Eleonora Duse: Actress in Search of an Author', *Theatre Arts*, 12 (1954), 76-78 and 95-96 (p.96).



misfortune into *the demi-monde*, and Duse gave her mainly *petite bourgeoisie* connotations.<sup>61</sup> However, for every nineteenth-century actress trained mainly in highly sentimental melodrama, Marguerite's keynote remained the passion she nourished and lived for and it could be argued that the peculiar melodramatic style of the early interpreters of Dumas' character could have contributed in elevating the role to what Barthes describes as "an archetype of bourgeois sentimentality, a mythology of love which probably still exists."<sup>62</sup> Sheldon Cheney suggested that the play is fundamentally melodramatic "crossed with the well-made play"<sup>63</sup> and feminist critic Ferris has pointed out that "this role of penitent whore was born out of the collision between two archetypal female images, the harlot saint of Catholic hagiography and melodrama's virtuous woman" and came to encompass

Old-age views and prejudices alongside of a more modern secular vision of purity and goodness restoring moral order(...)For the first time in the nineteenth century with Marguerite a prostitute vaults into a position of prominence and usurps the centremost theatrical role of the sign of virtue.<sup>64</sup>

In Italy Marguerite became a favourite role throughout the second half of the nineteenth century with all major actresses bridging the gap between the *grande attore* tradition of Ristori and the fin de siècle modern generation of Duse. Actresses of this middle generation started to be

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61. See Molinari, *Attrice*, p.92.

62. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* trans. by Annette Levers (London: Paladin, 1973), p.113.

63. Sheldon Cheney, *The Theatre* (New York: Longmans, 1929), p.414.

64. Lesley Ferris, *Acting Women* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp.79-81.

drawn to a character like Marguerite when their concern with the creation of a model of virtue, so widespread at Ristori's time, progressively decreased and their efforts were directed towards a cogent expression of their artistic merits.<sup>65</sup> Therefore the socially contemptible characteristics of Marguerite did not prevent actresses from staging the play as soon as they started to perceive the play as a proper vehicle for the actress. However, in 1882 the year when Duse first performed it and thirty years after its first Italian version the role was still felt as French and identified with Sarah Bernhardt, as suggested in an article published just after Bernhardt's tour in Italy.<sup>66</sup> The article advocates that nationality was a great obstacle to Italian actresses performing Marguerite because in their interpretations they all somehow dwarfed Marguerite, since they seemed capable of capturing only her feelings but not her whole life as well. Bernhardt, on the other hand, was the only actress able to experience and show Marguerite in her entirety.

Duse may have read this article and been encouraged to stage the play that same year 1882 in an attempt to rival Bernhardt. When she opened with Marguerite in 1893 in England the role of the French courtesan was considered no longer dangerous and "seemed to have very little in common with the existing condition of the drama."<sup>67</sup> However, this drawback eventually turned into an advantage for Duse on her international debut as it suggested comparison with other foreign interpreters in England, like Bernhardt and Modjeska and placed Duse "above them both."<sup>68</sup> Comparison with British actresses could not be invited since the play had indeed

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65. Ciotti-Cavalletto, pp.90-91.

66. *Il Corriere del Mattino*, March 1882. Quoted in Guerrieri, *Duse*, pp.181-82.

67. 'Signora Duse at the Lyric', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 25 May 1893.

68. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 25 May 1893.



been felt as risqué and therefore had never featured in the repertoire of celebrated mainstream actresses who were probably concerned with preserving their ladylike image unscathed (as was most likely the case with Ristori who never included Dumas's heroine in her repertoire).

The history of this play in England starts with a London production in the 1860s at the Sadler's Wells, outside the pool of recognized theatres, followed by an adapted and expurgated version under the title *Heartsease*, first performed in 1875 at the Princess' Theatre starring Helen Barry as Constance (Marguerite). Helena Modjeska included *Heartsease* in her tours in England in 1880 and 1881, after having often performed the unabridged version in the United States, where the play was known under the title *Camille*. Modjeska points out in her memoirs that *Heartsease* had been presented as the work of an English author and alterations made in order to bypass censorship, therefore any reference to objectionable features of the heroine's profession had been avoided and camellias changed into less suggestive heartseases.<sup>69</sup> In 1881 Bernhardt performed Marguerite in French on the English stage and since then the role had been known to English audiences as fundamentally a Bernhardtesque creation. After Duse's premiere, however, "two Marguerites were in the field, two distinct and separate creations, neither owing anything to the other."<sup>70</sup>

Cast in the wayward woman mould, the role remained one of Duse's landmark interpretations and was performed almost uninterruptedly in all her seasons until 1909. To her contemporaries this part seemed to best highlight Duse's modern and internal conception of a role, to the extent that, if compared to Bernhardt's external art it would, in Archer's words, conjure up a "sensation of passing into the

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69. Modjeska, *Memoirs*, pp.401-402.

70. 'Signora Duse at the Lyric Theatre', *The Times*, 25 May 1893.

fresh air from an alcove redolent of patchouli."<sup>71</sup> It is in fact commonly agreed that Duse stripped Marguerite of all her courtesan characteristics and highlighted her status of *grisette*, a lowly working girl, usually a dressmaker or a modiste, accidentally turned into *demi-mondaine*. The stress on Marguerite's humble milieu would appear to be in tune with Barthes' analysis of Marguerite's tragedy as that of a petit bourgeois woman's alienation from the class of her masters, whose ultimate sacrifice is a quest for recognition.<sup>72</sup> Molinari has pointed out that Duse apparently managed to convey Marguerite's alienation by opting for a distinctly low-key interpretation. She entered the stage unobtrusively, almost in a hurry and would always perform automatic, minute gestures as a sign of her uneasiness in the world she lived in. Her lower middle class status was markedly set off by her sumptuous dresses that, unlike Bernhardt's period costumes, were modern in fashion, and defined Marguerite as a contemporary character.<sup>73</sup> A review in the *Star* drew attention to Duse's "Camille in white" and suggested that "virginal white, slightly toned down to suit the footlights and disregard of the rouge-pot was the uniform tint of all [her] costumes". These seemed to range in colour from soft cream to faint ivory, "suggestive of pristine purity" and be loosely fashioned or completely wrap her figure as in the opening scene of the last act where she was clad in flowing ivory crepe outlined with swansdown or in the death scene when she was enveloped in a long white cloak.<sup>74</sup>

Duse's low-key interpretation deeply affected London audiences, with a few exceptions who disapproved of her

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71. Archer, *World of 1894*, p.147.

72. Barthes, *Mythologies*, p.111.

73. Molinari, *Attrice*, p.94.

74. 'Camille in White', *Star*, 25 May 1893.



"positively robust and wholly unsentimental" Marguerite and tended to prefer Bernhardt's highly coloured *hetaira*.<sup>75</sup> Archer argued that Duse's reading of Marguerite was better suited to the theatre in the 1890s where "the roses and ruptures of neurasthenia" had taken the place of the "lilies and languors" of Marguerite's sentimental age and therefore approved of Duse's "shunning rouge and bistre and spare the tawny name of Titianesque tradition."<sup>76</sup> Audiences were in fact "clutched by this fragile, insignificant looking, almost plain little woman, (...) who could express absolute sincerity and never indulged in monkey tricks."<sup>77</sup> It seemed clear, however, that in order to appreciate her impersonation "every pre-conceived notion should be dismissed", such as the idea that Marguerite should suffer from tuberculosis since Duse's Marguerite was

no longer racked with the consumptive cough of the tradition to the point that one wonders whether she is consumptive at all.<sup>78</sup>

Her new key-note to the character appeared to be "naturalness and true womanliness"—though the critic is aware that Duse is still relying on an acting technique—that would reveal Marguerite's *virginité d'âme* according to Dumas' conception.<sup>79</sup> The humanity of Duse's Marguerite was also pointed out, though it might contrast with a traditional courtesan role:

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75. *Illustrated London News*, 15 July 1893.

76. Archer, *World of 1894*, p.147.

77. 'Eleonora Duse in *Camille*', *Star*, 25 May 1893.

78. *The Times*, 25 May 1893.

79. *The Times*, 25 May 1893.

One would hardly choose the hectic heroine of Dumas' sickly and unsavoury romance for an example of the crystal virtues of true womanhood, yet Signora Duse's art is equal to endowing this poor fragile piece of frailty with heroic quality, and of thus endowing her without abating one jot of her humanity.<sup>80</sup>

Alongside descriptions of her "magic voice uttering the soft Italian speech" and "her subtle and plastic gestures that would make the beholder content if the actress were a mime",<sup>81</sup> critics often pointed out that Duse never attempted to strike an attitude or occupy the centre of the stage for the sheer purpose of "making a picture"<sup>82</sup> and would choose "infinitely suggestive and expressive gestures", rather than demonstrative ones.<sup>83</sup> Her figure and body language were described as follows:

The Italian is a smallish, thin, sallow, nervous woman, with two lovely black eyes, a flat figure and very little grace of gesture. She is reckless and indeed very little inclined to jump about, in the expressive vulgarism, like a cat on hot bricks. She does not strike long, languorous photographer's attitudes, but falls squarely on her elbows, or rolls herself up into a ball, or thumps her breast or slaps her knees. In short she is (...) a bundle of nerves.<sup>84</sup>

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80. 'La dame aux camélias', *Theatre*, 1 June 1894.

81. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 25 May 1893.

82. 'Eleonora Duse', *Saturday Review*, 27 May 1893.

83. Philip Houghton, 'The Marguerite Gautier of Eleonora Duse', *Theatre*, 1 June 1894.

84. 'Duse', *Star*, 25 May 1893.



Nervous feverishness could give way to profound melancholy which would shadow her face in her moments of repose.<sup>85</sup> Her playing-down appeared extremely effective in the first three acts encompassing the weak woman phase and she appeared very quiet in the first two only to wake up in the third act. Reviewers singled out effective moments of her performance, such as her "girlish wonderment at Duval's first protestations of love, as she half turns around upon a sofa to look into the depths of his eyes", or her "unrestrained vent of emotions in the scene with Armando's father". The utterance of Armando's name was considered the most moving thing in the tragedy:

The "armando," (sic) Love's voice breaking with tenderness. The "armando," Love's voice *still*, entreating him to forbear from insult to her honour. The "armando," Love's voice still, as she lies dying in the agony of parting from the man to whom she has given a life's noble devotion.<sup>86</sup>

Comparison with the Bernhardt-esque style was invited in the last act when Marguerite on observing her progressive decline exclaims "*Ah, come sono cambiata!*" (Ah, how I have changed!). Here Bernhardt used to look at "the ravages of her illness" through a looking-glass, while Duse gazed upon "her worn and wasted hands" and contemplated her "bluest veins." The death scene appeared to be her best where, in keeping with the whole conception of the play, she did not fully exploit the melodramatic potentiality of death on stage:

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85. *Saturday Review*, 27 May 1893.

86. Houghton, 'Eleonora Duse'.

Recumbent upon her bed, she dies in Armand's embrace and the fall of her arm from his neck is the only sign that denotes the end.<sup>87</sup>

It would appear then that Duse's "*grisette*" Marguerite strongly appealed to London audiences, even though an eminent critic like Clement Scott completely rejected Duse's reading. As a strong advocator of the traditional grand manner style of Ristori, whom he reckoned as the greatest Italian artist, next to Salvini, Scott tended to dismiss Duse's performance, which he considered as wholly wanting in pathos.<sup>88</sup> He argued that "to take a sentimental play and divest it of all sentiment is absolute nonsense" and maintained that Duse did not understand the character. Furthermore, he objected to the changes made in order to avoid being sentimental, such as cutting the letter writing scene after her interview with Armand's father. Duse's attempt to eliminate the demi-mondaine flavour and create a feeling of purity and redemption was explained by Scott in terms of her "lack of womanliness and inability to bring out the suggestion of her sex". He maintained that Duse's reading was an impossible one "and it is permissible to fancy that it has been adopted because of her inability to adopt the true reading."<sup>89</sup> As he advocated:

Marguerite Gautier is a French courtesan dying of consumption and a broken heart. To play her otherwise is absurd.<sup>90</sup>

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87. *The Times*, 25 May 1893.

88. Scott, *Yesterday and Today*, II, p.4.

89. *Sketch*, 31 May 1893.

90. *Illustrated London News*, 15 July 1893.



Scott's attack on Duse's Marguerite was repeated the following year on Duse's second tour in London when Sarah Bernhardt was also performing *La dame aux camélias*. This time Scott's criticism was directed more overtly to all those "leaders of dramatic thought" who, by praising Duse's new style, were "ineffectually" carrying on a war against all that was "theatrically effective in art". He dismissed the "cool, deliberate and unmoved manner" in which she preached the "Gospel of ineffectiveness" and argued that hers "may be a new school of art, but not the school of artistic nature."<sup>91</sup> This was still worthily represented by Sarah Bernhardt who in her interpretation of Marguerite proved that she could rise "higher and higher to a climax of grandeur" and thoroughly "exhaust her audience". Scott argued that in the death scene Bernhardt succeeded in enthraling her audience by radiating nervous strain and tension, to the extent that when the curtain fell the admiring crowd looked and gazed at one another helplessly.<sup>92</sup> Duse, on the other hand, managed to create an exquisitely realistic and impressive death scene "from the point of view of physical pain", but had left her audience unmoved. Scott's enthusiastic praise lavished on Bernhardt stemmed essentially from an appreciation of her conception of the role, which consisted in expressing "the two soul-sides" of Marguerite. Brandon suggests that Bernhardt was able to convey Marguerite's courtesan soul in the early part of the play when she would play a pleasure-seeking cocotte, and then she would transform herself into an angelic and selfless Marguerite which would make the end of the play more effective.<sup>93</sup> According to Scott, Duse, on the other hand, was never the double Marguerite and always showed

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91. *Illustrated London News*, 12 May 1894.

92. *Illustrated London News*, 7 July 1894.

93. Ruth Brandon, *Being Divine: A Biography of Sarah Bernhardt* (London: Mandarin, 1992), p.1.

only one side, that of the woman "who is continually stifling herself and her natural emotion."<sup>94</sup>

In later tours Duse occasionally made a few changes to her interpretation. For instance, in 1894 she restored the letter writing scene, only to cut it down to nothing again in 1895. However, it would appear that her prevailing low-key note remained fundamentally untouched and she would still convey the impression that "the role was played in a style different from that of others."<sup>95</sup>

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Duse and Bernhardt's English performances of Marguerite in the 1890s offer a good insight into the Bernhardt-Duse rivalry, mainly originating in their opposing conceptions of the characters in a fairly similar repertoire. Bernhardt's tendency to impose "her fascinating self upon the rather underdeveloped characters" of the Sardou-Dumas school exploited all the opportunities that this repertoire offered "in terms of spectacle, stardom, and technical mastery" and turned all her creations into facets of her stage persona.<sup>96</sup> Duse, on the other hand, aimed at infusing a new life into these cardboard characters, "the poor women" as she often referred to them, trying to comfort them and make her audience grasp "the inexplicable reciprocity of feeling between those women and herself."<sup>97</sup> Bernhardt's "passionate impulse and abandonment to the tempest of the scene" as opposed to Duse's "cool and calculating method" in

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94. *Illustrated London News*, 12 May 1893.

95. *Sketch*, 12 June 1894.

96. Brandon, *Divine*, p.386.

97. See letter from Eleonora Duse to Francesco D'Arcais (1886). Quoted in Molinari, *Attrice*, p.74 and partially translated in Knepler, p.194.



rendering a similar gallery of characters were, according to Scott, two different expressions of the eternal feminine:

"Sarah Bernhardt is the woman of yesterday: Eleonora Duse is the woman of to-day."<sup>98</sup> However, the heroines of the Dumas and Sardou school had been "brightly painted the day before yesterday" and called for an interpretation that would suit their age, therefore "Duse's unsentimentality" imposed on "Marguerite's sentiment" was, in his opinion a misinterpretation, whereas to others it meant a watershed in dramatic art.

Scott's dismissal of Duse's Marguerite might be explained in terms of the standard male playgoer's resistance towards an unwomanly representation of womanhood. Due to her "lack of womanliness" and inability to "bring out the suggestion of her sex", Duse created an unsexed Marguerite that was felt as uncanny and disturbing insofar as she defeated the standard iconography of the "tart with a golden heart". On a metatheatrical level as an actress "lacking the feline charm of a Bernhardt or a Rehan" who could both "make fashionable successors to Cora Pearl,"<sup>99</sup> she failed, therefore, to fulfil the role of a commodity exposed to the male gaze.

#### **New Woman or *Bambola*? Eleonora Duse in the *Doll's House*.**

On 9th February 1891 on the eve of her first major international tour, Duse made her debut as Nora in Ibsen's *Casa di bambola* (*A Doll's House*) at the Teatro dei Filodrammatici in Milan. At that time Ibsen was still unknown to Italian audiences and his plays were available only in French translations. Soon after Duse's Nora, however, other productions of Ibsen's plays followed, in the

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98. Clement Scott, 'Eleonora Duse: An Appreciation', *Sketch*, 2 May 1894.

99. *Sketch*, 31 May 1893.

interpretations of famous Italian actors, such as Ermete Novelli in *L'anitra selvatica* (*A Wild Duck*) (1891) and Ermete Zacconi in *Spettri* (*Ghosts*) (1892). Many of his plays came out in translations, usually based on the French texts by Moritz Prozor.<sup>100</sup> In the early 1890s, however, there seemed to be little interest in the Norwegian playwright in Italy, as testified for instance by the overt resistance to Ibsen expressed by Arrigo Boito, well-known poet and literary man who was to play a decisive role in Duse's career with a lavishly mounted production of *Antony and Cleopatra* which he adapted and translated. In a letter to Duse dated 1890, Boito referred to Ibsen as

An old Norwegian playwright who has now taken to distilling rhubarb for the theatre. What a nonsense! It is impossible that you like him. Nowadays in Paris they pretend they enjoy him.<sup>101</sup>

Despite Boito's blunt dismissal, Duse single-mindedly carried out her plan to stage Ibsen and played a decisive pioneering role in acquainting Italian audiences with his works. After her première in Milan, critics pointed out that the spirit of the Norwegian playwright whose characters were based on people of "his northern race" and therefore remarkably different from the Latin people, could not be entirely grasped by Milanese audiences.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, it appeared that Ibsen's theories on marriage and women's rights put forward in *A Doll's House* did not succeed in stirring Italian audiences whose mild interest in Ibsen was but a faint echo of the heated debate on his work that was

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100. For the early history of Ibsen's translations and stage adaptations in Italy see Francesca Simoncini, 'Prime traduzioni italiane di Ibsen di fine Ottocento', *Il Castello di Elsinore*, 16 (1993), 123-142.

101. Arrigo Boito and Eleonora Duse, *Lettere d'amore*, ed. by Raul Radice (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1979), pp.705-706.

102. *L'Arte drammatica*, 21 February 1891.



raging in England and Germany at the time.<sup>103</sup> However, Duse's performance was positively received, despite the fact that the play had been inadequately translated.

The writer Luigi Capuana had based his translation on the French version by Prozor and asked the French translator for permission to alter the end of the play since he thought that a happy ending would better suit Italian audiences. A happy ending had been chosen for the first performance of the play in Germany in 1881 according to the wishes of the actress Hedwig Niemann-Raabe who played Nora. Ibsen himself re-wrote the final scene for the German première, but in the case of the Italian translation he objected to the change on the grounds that the original ending would not prevent Italian audiences from understanding and appreciating the play, therefore Capuana had to abide by the author's decision.<sup>104</sup> Capuana's translation appeared in 1891, in installments, in the theatre journal *Carro di Tespi* under the title *Bambola* (Doll) which is a first clear sign of how the translation was meant to be a watered-down version of the play. The fact that he had not been allowed to alter the final scene, did not prevent Capuana from emphasizing in the text the kittenish and doll-like aspects of Nora, who is referred to by her husband as "*allodoletta che gorgheggia*", "*stornellino*", and has "*cari occhietti e belle manine*"<sup>105</sup>, which, if compared to their English equivalent "twittering

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103. Giovanni Pozza, *Cronache teatrali (1886-1930)* ed. by G.A. Cibotto (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1971). See review of *Casa di bambola*, 10 - 11 February 1891, p.101.

104. See Michael Meyer on this episode, *Ibsen* (London: Hart-Davis, 1967; repr. London: Cardinal, 1992), p.681 and Henrik Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, ed. by Evert Sprinchorn (London: MacGibbon, 1965), p.300.

105. Luigi Capuana, 'Bambola. Atto I', *Carro di Tespi*, 11 (1891). Note that in this and in the following quotes from Capuana's text all the nouns are in their Italian diminutive form. *Allodoletta* is literally a little lark, *manina* is a little hand and so on.

lark", "playbird", "blessed eyes" and "delicate little fingers"<sup>106</sup> show a more frequent use of diminutive forms.

Furthermore, the language of the Italian Nora appears to be a sort of refined baby-talk. On Christine's arrival for instance, Nora notices how "*palliduccia and magrolina*" she looks, where the English version has "a little paler and a little thinner" and when the two women engage in conversation Nora refers to her works as "*cosettine, lavoretti all'uncinetto*", whereas the English Nora talks of "light fancy work: crochet, and embroidery, and things of that sort". Capuana's translation was no hindrance to Duse's staging of the play and it could be argued that the actress's reading of Nora as more of a "strong-minded woman and less of a empty-headed doll",<sup>107</sup> was even reinforced by the limits imposed by the watered-down version of the character found in the Italian translation.

Later in her career, Duse played other Ibsen roles. These are *Hedda Gabler*, Mrs Alving in *Ghosts*, Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm* and Ellida in *The Lady from the Sea*. It would appear then, that at a time when her repertoire was basically centred around French plays, her fascination for a character like Nora stemmed from a desire to find an alternative to her standardized and fairly obsolete repertoire and to open up to modern drama. The attraction of Ibsen's characters for the actresses of the 1890s is poignantly explained by Elizabeth Robins when she states that, as actresses, they were less concerned with the ideological stance of a play like *A Doll's House* than with the possibilities a character like Nora offered to them:

If we had been thinking politically, concerning ourselves about the emancipation of women, we would

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106. The text used is Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*, in *Four Plays* trans. by William Archer (London: Nelson, 1941), pp 23-107, (p.26). Archer's translation of *A Doll's House* came out in 1889.

107. Archer, *World for 1893*, p.156.



not have given the Ibsen plays the particular kind of wholehearted, enchanted devotion we did give. We were actresses— actresses who wouldn't for a kingdom be anything else. We got over that. But I'm talking about '89-'91 (...) Ibsen had taught us something we were never to unlearn. The lesson had nothing to do with the New Woman; it had everything to do with our particular business— with the art of acting.<sup>108</sup>

To Duse a play like *A Doll's House* offered the possibility of exploring its subtext, which according to Molinari meant essentially the discovery of the theme of disillusionment.<sup>109</sup> Duse would express this by means of long, "voiceless" pauses, charged with a high dramatic value, which would illuminate thoughts and charge words with special resonances. The novelty of Duse's Nora was first grasped by Hugo von Hofmannstahl following Duse's debut in Vienna in 1892:

Duse plays what is in between the lines of the script. She impersonates the character, fills the gaps of meaning, recreates the psychological drama. By a trembling of her lips, a shrugging of her shoulder, a variation in her voice, she shows the ripening of a decision, the swift unfolding of thoughts, the whole psychological and physical expression preceding the creation of a word.<sup>110</sup>

And then he points to the magnetic attraction exerted by her mere presence on stage or by her byplay:

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108. Robins, pp.31-33.

109. Molinari, *Attrice*, pp.142-144.

110. Hugo von Hofmannsthal (Loris), 'Eleonora Duse: Eine Wiener Theaterwoche', (1892); repr. in *Prosa I* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1956), pp.66-71, p.68.

During pauses when others are playing, it is impossible to divert the eyes from her, because it is then that she shows the onset of revelation, the falling apart of inner illusion, the painful ripening of necessity(...) her [final] decision is eventually mature, and we have witnessed that it has ripened out of inherent necessity.<sup>111</sup>

Hofmannsthal's impression seemed to point out an element of Duse's acting that has been described as autistic gesture, or

The subtle visual sign of the character's soliloquy with himself. It is this type of introspective gesture which allowed the Ibsen actress to show the audience the dialogue taking place within the character(...) often the actress gestured through subtle facial expressions, especially eye and lip movements, or through the movements of hands to the body.<sup>112</sup>

Since 1884, prior to Duse's Italian Nora, when an adaptation entitled *Breaking a Butterfly* was produced at the Prince of Wales's in London, there had been a few attempts to stage *A Doll's House* in England. It consisted of a heavily bowdlerized version of Ibsen's play culminating in a highly melodramatic happy ending that William Archer defined as a "nice little play, standing to *Et Dukkehjem* somewhat in the relation of Mr. Gilbert's *Gretchen* to Goethe's *Faust*."<sup>113</sup> An amateur performance based on Henriette Lord's translation was given the following year at a hall in Argyle Street in London but not until 1889 was a *Doll's*

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111. Hofmannsthal, p.69.

112. Gibson Cima, p.22.

113. Quoted in Meyer, p.547.



*House* presented to English theatregoers, outside amateur circles. Based on Archer's translation from the Norwegian, the play was performed at the Novelty Theatre under the joint management of Charles Charrington and Janet Achurch who played the parts of Rank and Nora, respectively. This production was felt to be a real breakthrough on the English stage and as Archer suggested, it marked Ibsen's "second stride towards world-wide (...) renown, after the success of *Pillars of Society* in Germany."<sup>114</sup> The success of the play established Ibsen's fame in England but it also established Janet Achurch's reputation as an accomplished actress. When Duse appeared as Nora to English audiences four years later the role was still identified with the English actress who was often referred to in reviews of Duse's performance.

It would appear that Duse's reading of the character tended to reveal Nora as a New Woman at the expense of the empty-headed doll, although not all critics agreed on Duse's key to her character. Unlike Marguerite and other conventional roles of the French school presented by Duse in her first tour on whose reading critics tended to agree, Nora opened to different interpretations and on the whole inspired mixed feelings. The 'New Woman' reading would seem to be endorsed, however, by a picture showing Duse in one of her costumes (presumably used in the first act) which bears a strong similarity to the uniform which usually identified the New Woman. In the early 1890s this type of intellectual and emancipated woman was often lampooned in the columns of *Punch* and the clothes in which she was often portrayed were similar in fashion to the costume worn by Duse as Nora: a dark, plain and rather unattractive dress fashioned after the rational dress, complemented by the latchkey, the true hallmark of the New Woman. According to contemporary female iconography, her dress clearly identifies Duse's Nora as an early suffragette.

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114. Postlewait, ed., *Archer on Ibsen*, p.213.

The *Pall Mall Gazette* argued that Duse's Nora was interesting and attractive but essentially "a southern woman and therefore of a different temperament and simpler strain than Ibsen's Nora Helmer."<sup>115</sup> According to the article, a major fault with Duse's interpretation was her failure to convey the childishness which was an important element in Nora's charm, first in her father's then in her husband's eyes:

One could not think of this demure reserved bourgeois as deserving the pet names which her husband heaps upon her.<sup>116</sup>

Her underplaying proved ineffective also in the second act where she failed to give a fitting presentation of *hysterica passio*. On the whole, the article argues, Duse was more concerned with displaying her method than with playing her part.

The *Era*, though disapproving of Nora's lack of childishness, did, on the other hand, agree with her omitting stagey elements, such as the tarantella scene, and appreciated her decision not to appear more juvenile.<sup>117</sup>

Archer gives a full length account of Duse's performance.<sup>118</sup> He thought her performance as "wonderfully impressive" and her first act a good display of natural acting revealing a strong minded Nora rather than the butterfly. However, he did not agree with some of her cuts, especially in the second act, and judged Achurch's performance in this act superior. Duse's treatment of her first interview with Rank, which she amply cut, failed "to

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115. 'Signora Duse as Nora Helmer', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 10 June 1893.

116. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 10 June 1893.

117. 'A Doll's House', *Era*, 17 June 1893.

118. Archer, *World for 1893*, pp.155-161.



mark the rhythm of the scene or contrast the gloom of the opening passage with the hectic gaiety of the middle portion and the serious dignity of the close."<sup>119</sup> He notes that she tended to avoid "all those bits that might sound cheap and easy" and almost totally omitted the tarantella. In a later article he remarked that the tarantella scene was a great attraction for the average actress, as it was a "theatrical effect of an unmistakable kind" and was Ibsen's last concession to his old French masters and might have made "the subject of a picture-poster."<sup>120</sup> Duse, for fear of becoming too melodramatic refused "to be legitimately dramatic" and her underplaying sacrificed all the stagy elements that Ibsen had borrowed from the French *pièce bien faite*. Archer was impressed by Duse's facial variety and described her four faces of Nora showing "cloudless gaiety in the first act, tense anxiety in the second", while she grew "old and haggard-looking in the third, only to recover by intellectual animation and indignation a juvenile look in the fourth act". The ending of the play was brilliant and vivid, "Ibsen's last scene translated into Italian not merely in words but in tone and temperament as well", and Duse's Latin temperament justified her overriding the poet's direction. However, much as he admired her 'cisalpine' Nora, Archer did not altogether approve of Duse's departure from the business prescribed by Ibsen and wished she would restore the text and "make Ibsen her stage manager".

A very different image of Duse as Nora is offered by the *Times* which argued that the actress created a fundamentally neuropathic Nora and her performance was essentially designed to be a good example of her method:

It is rich in minute detail, full of kittenish irresponsibility, impulsiveness, petulance and unrest,

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119. Archer, *World for 1893*, p.159.

120. Postlewait, ed., *Archer on Ibsen*, pp.213-214.

yet with all that engaging sweetness, that grace of movement and perfect propriety and artlessness of gesture which distinguish the impersonations of the Italian actress from those of so many of her contemporaries.

However her interpretation of an unreflecting and hot-headed Nora would make any ending possible:

She may bang the street door after her, as she goes forth in quest of that higher and nobler existence to which she aspires, but in ten minutes, when she has had time for a change of mood, nobody would be surprised to hear her return cab-wheels outside. Furthermore, by highlighting only the feather-headed instability of her character, she would delete many of Nora's enigmatical attributes.<sup>121</sup>

The *Athenaeum* remarked that Duse's impersonation exhibited no pathos, but praised nonetheless her irresistible variety and vivacity. Her unrest however appeared to be less impressive than her seductiveness, and the necessity for her sacrifice did not seem convincing. On the whole, "the fact that she [was] not Ibsen's Nora seem[ed] patent."<sup>122</sup>

It could be argued that the contrasting attitudes to Duse's Nora on the part of the theatre critics derived from the difficulty of encoding her performance in contemporary stage practice. Critics and audiences were still used to the kind of presentational acting required by melodrama, "heavily reliant on stagy elements and clear-cut gesture designed to indicate, illustrate or emphasize various

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121. 'Duse's *Doll's House*', *The Times*, 12 June 1893.

122. 'Duse's Nora', *Athenaeum*, 17 June 1893.



emotional states."<sup>123</sup> The first actors engaged in Ibsen's plays, though they experimented with new "realistic" acting modes, still tended to make concessions to presentational acting by looking out for those signs of theatricality encoded in Ibsen's text itself. In other words they pursued a "double line of action" whereby the actress performing Nora, for instance, would portray not only the Nora of the realistic play, but also the Nora of the melodrama, "bird-like and game-playing."<sup>124</sup> If, on the one hand, Duse's reading by privileging the "New Woman" and blotting out the "twittering lark", appealed to English critics as a further manifestation of the approaching end of "the art of the seismic kind"<sup>125</sup>, on the other, it was still felt quite alien to their stage tradition and difficult to be reckoned with. For this reason Achurch, whose performance had emphasized the "legitimate melodramatics" and therefore seemed to have met the expectations of London playgoers, stood out as an exemplary representative of "heroic acting", whereas Duse came across as a "true exponent of the Realist school."<sup>126</sup> A comparison between the two actresses was made by Shaw who maintained that Achurch had come close to Duse's style by revealing "subtlety, continuity and variety of detail". However, due to her conventional good looks and common range of expressions, Achurch was still "the vulgar great actress of the Bernhardt school."<sup>127</sup>

It could be argued that, just as the double-sided character of Marguerite might have been more effectively revealed had Duse made more concessions to melodramatic acting techniques in *La dame aux camélias*, the complexity of

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123. See Gibson Cima, p.22.

124. Gibson Cima, p.19.

125. *Theatre*, 1 July 1893.

126. Davies, 'Acting', p.117.

127. Shaw, *Our Theatres*, I, p.145.

Nora might have been better developed and the moment when she left home made more believable, had Duse accepted the potential theatricality of *A Doll's House*.

Prior to Duse's performance in England, Ibsen had been promoted by amateur ventures or was essentially identified with the new breed of intellectual actresses. As Elizabeth Robins explained, this was due to the fact that the professional actor who had long been on the stage would not be able to show "Ibsen's full value" in the same way as someone "whose talent is still mobile and comparatively modest, receptive". In her view, Duse, "the great—as Duse was great" proved to be the only exception.<sup>128</sup>

Magda and Paula Tanqueray. The *Révoltée* and the 'Woman with a Past'

Duse's attempt to renew her repertoire in the 1890s and move in the direction of the new drama is apparent, along with Ibsen's roles, in her interpretation of Magda in Sudermann's *Casa paterna* and Paula in Pinero's *La seconda moglie*.<sup>129</sup> As has been suggested, Duse was drawn to these plays because they both dealt with the theme of homecoming and the search for emotional stability, which must have been intensely felt by Duse at the time of her frequent touring abroad.<sup>130</sup> The lure of both plays may also have lain in the fact that they were conceived as a vehicle for the star actress featuring in the repertoire of other famous actresses and therefore offered scope for comparison.

They could be said to fall within the fairly stereotypical fin de siècle representation of the 'unwomanly

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128. Robins, *Ibsen*, pp.55-56.

129. Original titles were respectively *Heimat*, known to the English-speaking world as *Magda*, and *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*.

130. Molinari, *Attrice*, pp.155-156.



woman' insofar as Magda comes across as the 'révoltée' and Paula as the 'woman with a past'. Both characters are a further development of the wayward woman of the French school and tend to echo the complexity of Ibsen's characters. This potentially transgressive image of New Women, however, is jeopardized and neutralized by the dominant male perspective in which they are framed. I agree with Wiley when she states that:

When the New Woman herself became the object of performance, she fared no better than any woman imagined by conventional men. She could not be conceived by the male playwright, nor subsequently by his audience, until he translated her into what he desired the New Woman to be.<sup>131</sup>

In both plays there is a tendency to sustain the patriarchal order by preserving the double standard of sexual morality and failing to lift the ban on the fallen woman who is consequently doomed to be an outcast. Duse, however, managed to challenge the views sustained in both plays by acting against the surface level of the plot and working on the subtext. This resulted in a distinctive downplaying which endangered the representations of the new woman in contemporary society plays.

Your Magda has worked ten years. She who is writing has worked for twenty. The difference is huge if you think that she is a woman who, unlike Magda, has been counting the days until she leaves the theatre.<sup>132</sup>

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131. Catherine Wiley, 'The Matter with Manners: the New Woman and the Problem Play', *Themes in Drama*, 11 (1989), 109-127, (p.109).

132. "La vostra Magda ha lavorato dieci anni. Chi vi scrive lavora da venti. La differenza è enorme se si calcola che si tratta di una donna, e di una donna, la quale - al contrario di Magda - conta i giorni per andarsene dal teatro." Eleonora Duse, letter to Hermann Sudermann, 1893. Quoted in Molinari, *Attrice*, p.156.

In this famous and often quoted letter to the author of *Heimat*, Duse drew a parallel between her life as an actress and that of Magda as a singer, and thereby she pointed to a biographical affinity with the play's heroine. It seems clear therefore that this role appealed to Duse for the potential insight it offered into the status of a performer as a working woman.

Sudermann's piece is centred on the return of Magda, a celebrated singer, to her father's house after having been away for twelve years leading a bohemian life and rearing an illegitimate child. The homecoming forces Magda to face up to the rigidity of the patriarchal order embodied by her father, Schwartz, who at first rejects her and then tries to force her to give up her *primadonna* career and marry her former lover, father of her child. The lover's unwillingness to recognize the child provokes Magda to an outburst of rage and indignation and the old father is seized by a stroke and dies.

As Donkin suggests, there is a manifest irony in the title of the play, insofar as home "equates not with a place of refuge but a place of patriarchal tyranny", which Magda with her complex response to her father and her former lover tries to overturn.<sup>133</sup> As an indictment of the social and moral disdain facing the modern professional woman the play is reminiscent of the modern "Ibsenite" drama but it also borders on melodrama, especially in the dénouement. This duplicity was perceived by contemporary critics such as William Archer, who suggested that no comparison should be made between Ibsen and Sudermann, as the Norwegian playwright could be thought to have exerted only a general influence on later dramatists like Sudermann and Pinero, who had indeed tried to break away from the Sardou-Dumas

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133. Ellen Donkin, 'The Problem of Interpretation: Bernhardt, Duse, Fiske and Modjeska perform Magda', *Turn of the Century Women*, 4 (1987), 49-59, (p.49).



tradition but, unlike Ibsen, had created local or time-bound characters. He argued that Magda could be called a "study of a professional type", a vigorous stage figure but influenced by environment and social conditions. Furthermore, stylistic elements could also account for the difference of the play from any of Ibsen's works such as its lack of "retrospection or minutely-adjusted mosaic details."<sup>134</sup> Archer's view was endorsed in an article which appeared in the *Sketch* where the critic maintained that Sudermann had failed to create a lifelike stage creature, and on the whole the play appeared as scarcely developed, although the author had proved to be "modern in spirit and hostile to age old conventions."<sup>135</sup> Archer's failure to acknowledge any direct influence of Ibsen on Sudermann may also have been affected by the fact that he first became acquainted with the play through the interpretation of Sarah Bernhardt who had introduced Magda to the English stage on 10th June 1895 at the Daly's theatre. It was followed two days later by Duse's Italian Magda at the Drury Lane and was not staged in English until two years later when Mrs Patrick Campbell performed it. Bernhardt tended to emphasize the melodramatic traits of the play and depicted a feather-brained, frivolous Magda, which contrasted sharply with Duse's interpretation. Contemporary reviews engaged in extensive comparative analyses of the performances by the two actresses and hardly any piece of criticism discussed the one without referring to the other. In point of fact, the London stage in the summer season of 1895 witnessed the climax of the Bernhardt- Duse contest which was felt to be "extremely beneficial to the community at large", offering "food for reflection" and "stimulating interest in the healthiest and surest manner." It was believed that "under the influence of rivalry the performers were prompted to the manifestation of their most finished

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134. Archer, *World of 1895*, pp.201-202.

135. 'Bernhardt and Duse in Magda', *Sketch*, 19 June 1895.

art",<sup>136</sup> and that "from such a friendly duel the public can only be gainers."<sup>137</sup>

As a result of Duse and Bernhardt's season, theatre criticism was divided as to which of the two actresses best portrayed the role of Magda. Comparative analysis tended to focus on the difference in their key to the role, whereby Bernhardt seemed to emphasize "the sacredness of maternity" whereas for Duse Magda's right to control her own destiny was of crucial importance, alongside "the repudiation of respectability based on deceit and servile subjection to the many forms of nineteenth century hypocrisy."<sup>138</sup> Also, Bernhardt's tendency to overplay the role as opposed to Duse's downplaying, fuelled a debate on the contrasting acting styles of the two actresses which to some extent went beyond the analysis of their interpretation of Magda. Shaw discussed the play in terms of the two actresses' clashing stage personae. Bernhardt's Magda was a "glamorous" creation:

Her dresses, if not splendid, were at least splendacious, her crimson ears a foil to her auburn hair, her lips like a newly painted pillar box, her finger-tips delicately incarnadined and her cheeks having the bloom and surface of a peach.

He argued that she was beautiful "with the beauty of her school" and therefore entirely inhuman and incredible. Furthermore her tendency to dominate the production and constantly reveal herself through the character prevented her from entering into the leading character. Duse, on the other hand, did not hide her lines - "the credentials of her

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136. John Northcott, 'The Advantages of Comparison', *Theatre*, 1 August 1895.

137. 'Signora Eleonora Duse at Drury Lane', *Theatre*, 1 July 1895.

138. Northcott, 'Comparison', *Theatre*, 1 August 1895.



humanity" - nor her nearly grey lips, and expressed by every stroke of her acting a distinctively human idea, unlike Bernhardt whose acting relied on an "easily catalogued stock of attitudes and facial effects."<sup>139</sup>

The critic of the *Star* also seemed to side with Duse and deemed her second to Bernhardt only "in chronological order, but not in artistry". The Italian actress excelled in creative force and intellectual power whereas the French indulged in "emphatic commonplace" and "triumphant vulgarity":

Bernhardt has the distinction of externals, (...)the superb airs of an operatic 'diva', the self-consciousness of a 'celebrity'. Signora Duse's is a natural distinction, the nobility of a true woman shaken to the very roots of her being.<sup>140</sup>

Archer suggested that much as he had enjoyed "seeing Sarah in a human part", her interpretation was inferior to Duse's and could only strike as more impressive in those scenes where Duse exceeded in downplaying the role, as he did not fully agree with Duse's tendency "to overdo pauses and protract inarticulate effects"<sup>141</sup>.

In a later review he admitted being obliged to take sides and argued that Sarah, thanks to her willowy suppleness, queenly dignity and beautiful voice had clear advantages over Duse from a pictorial point of view. However, her genius had been fashioned into a money-making machine and could only express incarnate mannerism, whereas Duse was completely "alive" on the stage and able to

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139. Shaw, *Our Theatres*, I, pp.148-159.

140. 'Magda n.2', *Star*, 13 June 1895.

141. Archer, *World of 1895*, p.202.

Treat her genius, not as a freehold to be marred and wasted at pleasure, but as a trust estate, to be assiduously and reverently tended.<sup>142</sup>

According to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, her nuanced style allowed her to grasp the different moments of the play and enabled her to convey a wide range of emotions. From her first appearance on stage at the beginning of the second act she was "gay, rebellious, sardonic engrossing and delightful", only to change completely in the third act when she managed "to elevate the commonplace melodrama of the first two acts to the heights of tragedy" by expressing her "rage, passion, contempt derision self-assertion, pride, outrageous scorn, with a vigour that has no counterpart upon this contemporary stage."<sup>143</sup>

The *Star* pointed to her ability in 'becoming the part' in the third act:

She alone saturates herself with the ideas and emotions of her part, becomes one with it, is it (...) Signora Duse plays the great scene as it should be played, with more than a suggestion of hysteria; she laughs and sobs, beats her breast, sways and totters, raises her voice to a shrill scream — ugh! it is horribly life-like. But at the topmost pitch of her emotion she remains the true artist, never rants, never strikes a false note.<sup>144</sup>

And Rasi, who had witnessed Duse's London performance, drew attention to the moments of tender affection, when, for instance, Magda was met by her younger sister Maria and gave vent to her emotion by repeatedly uttering the words "la

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142. Archer, *World of 1895*, pp.205-206.

143. 'Signora Duse as Magda', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 13 June 1895.

144. *Star*, 13 June 1895.



*piccola, la piccola, la piccola*" and kissing and embracing her. According to Rasi, Duse stripped Magda of "her German bourgeois skin" and "filled her with real flesh". However he considered the play to be "fairly weak but for the great *primadonna* potential of the leading role."<sup>145</sup> This would appear to have been the appeal of the role for Bernhardt who greatly enlarged on the *primadonna* nature of the character to the extent that she conveyed the impression of acting almost regardless of the plot. As the *Sketch* pointed out:

[Bernhardt] portrays the Magda who (...) comes to visit her father's house out of curiosity and caprice and no stronger feeling(...) Magda à la Bernhardt after paying her visit and satisfying her curiosity, is quite prepared to go away and take up her vagabond career again.<sup>146</sup>

The critic of the *Times* thought Bernhardt's reading superior to Duse's insofar as she was able to reveal the "frank bohémienne", "the cabotine", whereas Duse failed in her interpretation because she tended to play the character of a born adventuress "upon the lines of distinction and womanly propriety habitual to her."<sup>147</sup>

It could be argued that Bernhardt played Magda as a "bravura actress" role whereas Duse went beyond this and aimed at revealing Magda's womanhood, as Symons suggests:

While I watch Duse's Magda, I can conceive of no others. She deems her an artist like herself. She plays the part with hardly a suggestion of the stage,

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145. Rasi, *Duse*, pp.70-71.

146. *Sketch*, 19 June 1895.

147. *The Times*, 16 June 1895.

except the natural woman's intermittent loathing for it.<sup>148</sup>

By deconstructing the *primadonna* role Duse created a subtext centred on the condition of the working woman and her difficulty in returning to the patriarchal home. It could be argued that her resistant reading engendered a sense of uneasiness and tended to be viewed as a "suggestion of hysteria."<sup>149</sup>

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After three successive tours in England between 1893 and 1895 five years elapsed before Duse appeared again in London, this time at the Lyceum theatre. The 1900 season was dominated by a revival of *Magda* and a new debut role, Pinero's *La seconda moglie*, along with an attempt to introduce the work of Gabriele D'Annunzio to English audiences, by staging *La Gioconda*. By that time the characters of *Magda* and *Paula Tanqueray* on the English stage were associated with Mrs Patrick Campbell. It was still felt, however, that only Duse was able to reveal the humanity of *Magda* whereas Mrs Campbell was following in Bernhardt's footsteps as the *Illustrated London News* suggested:

Duse is a woman of temperament and realizes herself most completely in the portrayal of yearning, suffering or outraged womanhood. In *Heimat* it is possible to emphasize more womanly and lovable attributes of the heroine without robbing her of the

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148. Arthur Symons, *Eleonora Duse* (London: Blom, 1927), p.9.

149. *Star*, 13 June 1895.



note of rebellious youthfulness. Magda loses in Duse's hands something of the flashy bohemianism and truculent egoism which Bernhardt and Campbell respectively conveyed.<sup>150</sup>

The role of Paula Tanqueray in Pinero's *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* had been made famous in 1893 by Mrs Patrick Campbell. Campbell stood out as a rather eccentric actress as she did not comply with the ladylike image of the recognized player queens of the English theatre and moreover she had not received a regular training as a child of the stage but had deliberately chosen the stage as a suitable profession for women. Her repertoire in the 1890s included along with melodramas and Shakespeare's plays, modern works such as Maurice Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Ibsen's *Little Eyolf* in which she played with the two Ibsenite actresses, Florence Farr and Elizabeth Robins. As an actress willing to open up to the new drama, she would have felt the appeal of the role of Paula Tanqueray in Pinero's play, a woman with a past.<sup>151</sup> This play was viewed by contemporary criticism as an original and startling piece of work, "running counter to the tradition which demands fairy tales in the theatre and resents the intrusion of any disagreeable remainders of life, especially on its seamy side."<sup>152</sup> Clement Scott, however, considered the play as a treatment of a somewhat morbid and unhealthy subject, and objected to its realism and modernism.<sup>153</sup> Far from seeing the play as an investigation into "the gravest facts of life

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150. 'Signora Duse in Magda and the Second Mrs Tanqueray', *Illustrated London News*, 19 May 1900.

151. On Mrs Patrick Campbell see her autobiography *My Life and Some Letters* (London: Hutchinson, 1922) and Margot Peters, *Mrs Pat: The life of Mrs Patrick Campbell* (London: Bodley Head, 1984).

152. 'The Second Mrs Tanqueray', *Illustrated London News*, 3 June 1893.

153. *Illustrated London News*, 29 July 1893.

in the spirit of serious manner"<sup>154</sup>, he argued that it was absolutely unconvincing and that women like Paula Tanqueray were not typical but, rather, "exceptional monstrosities". Recent criticism tends to acknowledge Pinero's debt to Ibsen and his effort to found a tradition of English New Drama, but considers *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* a sort of "Ibsen accommodated to Mayfair sensibilities", where the protagonist has been "re-dressed to West End sensibilities."<sup>155</sup>

After the premiere of the play the *Pall Mall Gazette* suggested that only two topics had been much talked of during the theatrical week, "The Second Mrs Tanqueray" and "la Duse", who had both given the playgoer an emotional week.<sup>156</sup> That the character of Paula would suit an actress like Duse was first suggested by Archer shortly after her English debut. He praised Pinero's play and reckoned that Paula would be "much better worthy of the art of Duse than the paltry Fedora."<sup>157</sup> On Duse's second English tour the critic of the *Theatre* argued that her conception of the "profoundest piece of womanhood in modern drama, Mr Pinero's (...) 'Mrs Tanqueray', would be an event to look forward to."<sup>158</sup> Therefore it is possible that Duse's interest in Pinero's play may have arisen during her early tours in England. Pinero himself talked about the possibility of Duse's staging *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* in a letter to William Archer dated 27 May 1894, but Duse eventually bought the rights of the play in 1896 and staged it only a year

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154. *Illustrated London News*, 3 June 1893.

155. Joel H. Kaplan, 'Pineroticism and the Problem Play: Mrs Tanqueray, Mrs Ebbsmith and "Mrs Pat"', in *British Theatre in the 1890s: Essays on Drama and the Stage*, ed. by Richard Foulkes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.38-58.

156. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 30 May 1893.

157. Archer, *World for 1893*, p.128.

158. *Theatre*, 1 June 1894.



later, after another Italian company had premiered the play in Milan in 1895 with the actress Teresa Leigheb in the title role.<sup>159</sup> In the Italian version the title had been translated as *La seconda moglie* (The Second Wife) which according to Rasi seemed to imply that Paula's story could be exemplary of any second wife. Therefore he suggested that the best option would be either a literal translation, "*La seconda signora Tanqueray*" or alternatively, "*Una seconda moglie*" which would both avoid hinting at the possible unfolding of a thesis in the play.

Duse's key to the role seemed to be the clash between Paula's present life as respectable wife of Aubrey Tanqueray and her past as a woman of pleasure. Therefore she attempted to convey in Paula's present every possible hint of her past. As Molinari describes it, this was achieved by portraying Paula with traits of childish playfulness, slightly vulgar and coquettish. Duse managed to suggest this by often adopting childish gestures and posture or by interplaying with objects.<sup>160</sup> Rasi felt that Duse was particularly effective in her first scene (act I, sc.iii) when she would munch grapes in a carefully studied manner, placing an emphasis on her hands, and also in the interview with Mrs Cortelyon (act II, sc. vii) when she would try to make Paula's uneasiness manifest by nervously playing with a parasol, pretending to draw lines on the floor. Coquetry and childish playfulness tended to conceal Paula's real condition and at the moment of Paula's revelation of her status of woman with a past in the fourth act, Duse again conjured up a vividly visual image of her distress and the breaking up of any illusion. In the final scene, during her confession to her husband, she would show the signs of her past on her face by drawing lines on her cheeks and brow

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159. Arthur W. Pinero, *Collected Letters* ed. by J.P. Wearing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974), p.159.

160. Molinari, *Attrice*, p.161.

with her hands or by stroking her face forming a web of lines.<sup>161</sup>

When Duse presented the play to English audiences, two main issues surfaced in the critics' response: a comparison between her reading of the character and that of Mrs Patrick Campbell and her interpretation of an Englishwoman. Prior to her debut critics wondered whether "her genius would enable her to surmount the huge difficulty of realizing to us a creature so utterly English."<sup>162</sup>

It was unanimously agreed that her Paula differed greatly from Campbell's. As Grein suggested, Duse made Paula a *demi mondaine* "with the would be elegance of a parvenue" and gave her the air of southern climes, whereas Campbell created a neurotic *grand dame*:

Duse makes her a product of the age (...) the jealous woman of classic tragedy and modern French comédie (...) Campbell tends to quiet, grey tints of *Weltschmerz*. [They are] as different as the silent sadness of a Dutch landscape is from a the azure of the Mediterranean tempest.<sup>163</sup>

The *Times* pointed out that Duse's acting was quieter and mellower than Campbell's. As for Duse's rendering of an English character, it appeared that she managed to wipe out Paula's specific English traits, as Archer argued, and "prove [her] universally human truth."<sup>164</sup> The *Sketch* regarded the play as rather comic in Italian, since foreigners appeared amusingly un-English in manners and appearances and the *Times* argued that since it was

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161. Molinari, *Attrice*, p.161.

162. 'Duse', *Sketch*, 9 May 1900.

163. J.T. Grein, *Dramatic Criticism*, (New York: Blom, 1971), pp.296-298.

164. Archer, 'Eleonora Duse', *World*, 16 May 1900.



impossible for Italian players to realize English characters, their only way out consisted in generalizing their traits. Furthermore the Italian version failed to reveal "insular respectability, moral standard and good breeding as opposed to the flamboyant vulgarity of Paula". There were also major faults with the translation which attempted to be too faithful insofar as it retained elements of English conventional respectability, that, however, were not in the range of an Italian company. Therefore in *La seconda moglie*, vulgarity was avoided and the local was converted into the universal, "with loss of piquancy and point but no loss of essential truth". Accordingly, Duse generalized her part and instead of depicting an Englishwoman of a certain class or history, she created "a woman, the universal woman, the eternal feminine(...), the general type of *révoltée* at war with herself."<sup>165</sup>

As Paula, Duse was generally considered to be "too magnificent an instrument for a comparatively humble piece of work,"<sup>166</sup>, and critics considered her conception of the character to be loftier than Pinero's. Reviewers focused on Duse's final scene where she revealed all the mute tragedy of her despair, and her greatness in moments of silence, though the *Times* regretted that during such intense moments "in accordance with the orthodox practice of the Italian stage", the whispering of the prompter should be audible.<sup>167</sup> In the final scene, the tragedy of her situation was conveyed "by a glance" and her gesture of showing the signs of her despicable past on her face "chilled the blood of the onlooker."<sup>168</sup> The tragic side of Paula was enhanced by avoiding artifice and any suggestion of make up:

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165. 'Signora Duse in *La seconda moglie*', *The Times*, 14 May 1900.

166. 'Duse as Paula Tanqueray', unidentified cutting, London, Theatre Museum, File on Duse, 1900.

167. *The Times*, 14 May 1900.

168. Unidentified cutting, T. M., f.D., 1900.

The hair at the top of her temples, soft, glossy and abundant has yet become silver. It is the proud and unique distinction and privilege of Signora Duse to use no make-up; <sup>169</sup>

which would seem to portray a weary and worn looking Paula who in the end almost looks haggard "her lips curved by age, cheeks sunken, eyes hollow."<sup>170</sup>

Through Paula Tanqueray and the other roles discussed which have been singled out from the repertoire of plays which she presented on the English stage between 1893 and 1900, Duse explored the complexity and the different facets of the unwomanly woman. Her typically fin de siècle repertoire of wayward women contributed to the creation of "the legend of Duse" since they presented her with vehicles for facing up to and challenging the contemporary representation of womanhood on stage and the standard icon of the star actress.

#### (v) The Fin de Siècle and Beyond

As Stokes has argued, the legend of Duse, ensuing from her successful English tours in the 1890s, was a way of framing the uneasiness and eccentricity projected by the Italian actress into a decadent, fin de siècle perspective.<sup>171</sup> Duse's legendary image was nourished mainly by her manifest rejection of any artifice and technique to the extent that, as Archer suggests, her mastering of "the

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169. 'Duse as Magda and *La seconda moglie*', *Athenaeum*, 19 May 1900.

170. Grein, *Criticism*, p.298.

171. John Stokes, 'The Legend of Duse', in *Decadence and the 1890s*, ed. by Ian Fletcher (London: Arnold, 1979), pp.151-171.



art that conceals art (...) ha[d] achieved the effect of unadulterated nature."<sup>172</sup> Therefore she came to be perceived as a natural, quintessential actress in terms often verging on the mystical. Gordon Craig, for example, wrote:

No, not an actress, but something more; not an artist but something less; a personality; and then something far more than all these three.<sup>173</sup>

Arthur Symons argued that she was the type of artist who was "only by accident an actress (...) an actress through being the antithesis of the actress."<sup>174</sup> He discussed her art in terms of self-revelation and by suggesting the image of the sculptor moulding clay, pointed to her striking quality of seeming to forge self out of self:

The face of Duse is a mask for the tragic passions, a mask which changes from moment to moment, as the soul models the clay of the body after its own changing image. Imagine Rodin at work on a lump of clay. The shapeless thing awakens under his fingers, a vague life creeps into it, hesitating among the forms of life (...) the art of Duse is to do over again, consciously, the sculpture of the soul upon the body.<sup>175</sup>

Laura Marholm, one of the first women reviewers of Duse's art, believed that the intense creative process Duse seemed to go through enabled her to reveal truth, and she was later echoed by the American actress Eva Le Gallienne,

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172. Archer, 'Duse', p.305.

173. Edward Gordon Craig, 'To Madame Eleonora Duse', *The Mask*, 1 (1908), 12-13, (p.12).

174. Symons, p.1.

175. Symons, pp.5-6.

who investigated the mystical nature of Duse's art. Marholm argued that Duse in her utter denial of theatricality, succeeded in revealing "the secret inner life of a woman":

She seemed to represent the genesis of a world, a civilization in embryo (...) Other actresses, with their convulsive art stand to Duse as a splendid festal march played with many instruments to a violin solo floating on the still night air.<sup>176</sup>

This idea is confirmed in Le Gallienne's words:

She appeared on the stage as a human being (...) obedient to the mysterious rhythm of nature (...) oblivious of being watched (...) Her voice was not an actor's voice (...) it was the voice of a human being (...) completely natural (...) There was nothing between her and truth. She was truth (...) She became those women, she did not force them to become her [and] projected the difference in these women not by the help of wigs or make-up, but solely by the mind, by means of her creative imagination.<sup>177</sup>

Intellectual power was one of the main traits of Duse's genius, according to Symons:

"All the time Duse is on the stage we see her thinking: not thinking her own thoughts, or expressing her own personality, but thinking the thoughts of the character she is representing."<sup>178</sup>

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176. Laura Marholm, *Six Modern Women*, trans. by Hermione Ramsden (London: Bodley Head, 1896), p.96.

177. Eva Le Gallienne, *Eleonora Duse: The Mystic in the Theatre* (London: Bodley Head, 1966), pp.123-126.

178. Symons, p.19.



As Bassnett points out, these comments are not to be taken at face value and seem to derive from the critics' uneasiness towards the new type of actress embodied by Duse. It follows that critics tended to describe Duse as a "spiritual actress":

Duse offered audiences an alternative representation of womanhood and of femininity, and perhaps some of the strangeness of the language of some critics who seem to have been obsessed by a notion of spirituality when discussing her performances derives from their attempts to adequately describe something entirely different in terms of the representation of women.<sup>179</sup>

Duse's appeal as a 'natural actress', without "the conscious rhetoric of the actress",<sup>180</sup> was paralleled by her reclusiveness as a woman, who would often shun publicity and the allure of stardom.

Archer admitted to being charmed by her "cloistral shrinking" from all the publicity of modern artistic life which would make of her "the Great Unknown" of the theatrical world<sup>181</sup>. To Archer, Duse's reluctance to give publicity "to her mental workshop" created "Duse's riddle", thereby everyone was able to give a different name to her "master quality" and find in her endowment just what they would be disposed to find. Her excessive reserve was viewed as the natural outcome of a proud, shy, supersensitive temperament which would not condescend to the "shifts and artifices of journalistic puffery", and therefore "horsewhips and coffins" (among the whims that had contributed to inflating Bernhardt's star image), would

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179. Stokes, Booth, Bassnett, p.134.

180. Symons, p.6.

181. Archer, 'Duse', p.299.

"find no place among her accoutrements."<sup>182</sup> As Scott pointed out, Duse would shun artifice also in her outer appearance by wearing plain dark clothes and no ornaments,

Save a long silver chain to which her household keys are attached, with a man's English made watch in her pocket, and an Englishman's cane in her hand - that is the great actress, Eleonora Duse, observing mankind and studying nature.<sup>183</sup>

She was perceived to be an uncanny and disturbing presence insofar as her acting, viewed as a revelation of some hidden truth, seemed to escape a reassuring frame of representation and as Beerbohm suggested, "expressed a prevailing egoistic force."<sup>184</sup>

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In the 1890s "the quality of force and active existence of the woman" found a visual counterpart in the iconography of the femme fatale.<sup>185</sup> When commenting on a portrait of Duse by John Sargent, painted around the time of Duse's first tour in England, art historian Martha Kingsbury points out a particular configuration of attributes usually identified with the femme fatale and compares the portrait to other paintings of the same type. The distinctive traits appear to be the frontal position, the upright taut posture combined with thrown back eyelids reinforced by concentrating

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182. Archer, 'Eleonora Duse: An Appreciation', *Sketch*, 2 May 1894.

183. Scott, 'Appreciation', *Sketch*, 2 May 1894.

184. Max Beerbohm, *Around Theatres* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1954), p.82.

185. Dijkstra, p.120.



patterns around her image. The first two traits project power and control, the latter abandon and acquiescence. In this painting the actress is not caught in performance and no particular role or dress is indicated:

The briefest suggestions of posture and gesture, and the paint itself focused concentrically on her head and eyes suffice to create a portrait of both individuality of characterization and the generalized power of the femme fatale (...) the actress seemed to exert her power through a passionate and energetic projection of her personality, while paradoxically playing a role in which her own identity might be endangered or lost.<sup>186</sup>

This portrait of Duse does not seem to fit the nineteenth-century icon of the actress and is an illustration of her challenge to the usual image of the actress embodying and magnifying a duplicity inherent in the nature of every woman, that of being both surveyor and surveyed, constantly aware of existing as an object to be looked at and exposed to the male gaze.

Duse seemed to challenge another pervasive cliché usually attached to actresses deriving from the widespread belief that women were originally imitators, therefore actresses appeared "unusually successful in exploiting the imitative bent of woman's nature". This argument was advocated by Sarah Bernhardt when she described acting as an essentially feminine art, "containing all the artifices which belong to the province of woman. The desire to please, facility to

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186. Martha Kingsbury, 'The Femme Fatale and her Sisters', in *Woman as Sex-object: Studies in Erotic Art 1730- 1970*, ed. by Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin (London: Allen Lane, 1973), pp.183-205, (p.185).

express emotions and hide defects, and the faculty of assimilation, which is the real essence of woman."<sup>187</sup>

Duse, on the other hand, challenged the role of a commodity assigned to women in a theatre of appearances: "by acting without any false rhetoric or rhetoric at all, pure unprotected semiosis of self-effacing performance"<sup>188</sup>, to the extent that she seemed to dismiss the idea of imitating and acting *tout court*.

It is a fact that she never talked about her art, nor left principles of dramatic art, as Ristori and Bernhardt did before her. On the contrary, she often claimed to live on the stage and described her art as toil and hard work:

Acting? What an ugly word! As if it was only a matter of acting...I feel that I have never been and never will be able to act.<sup>189</sup>

As Symons reports, her disdain for acting even turned into a contempt for actors:

To save the theatre, the theatre must be destroyed, the actors and actresses must all die of plague. They poison the air, they make art impossible.<sup>190</sup>

Duse's controversial relationship with her profession could also be explained in terms of the changing function of the actor in the making of the theatrical event at the turn of

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187. Sarah Bernhardt, *The Art of the Theatre*, trans. by H.J. Stenning (London: Bles, 1929), p.144.

188. Herbert Blau, *To all Appearances: Ideology and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p.2.

189. "Recitare? Che brutta parola. Se si trattasse di recitare soltanto.. io sento che non ho mai saputo e non saprò mai recitare." Letter from Eleonora Duse to Francesco D'Arcais, 1886. Quoted in Molinari, *Attrice*, p.78.

190. Symons, p.4.



the century which was paralleled by the rise of the director. Her longing for self-annihilation and her desire to let her characters live through her could be seen as facets of the move towards twentieth-century theories of acting which often posit at their centre a puppet-actor devoid of his/her own personality.<sup>191</sup>

The longing of the actress for self-annihilation was effectively portrayed by Luigi Pirandello in his theatre piece *Trovarsi* (1932). This work was inspired by the image of Duse, especially as cast by her appearance in Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea*.<sup>192</sup>

Pirandello focused the action on an actress, Donata (meaning Donated, Given) who goes through a deep identity crisis, not being able to separate her own life from that of the characters she represents. She tends continuously towards self-negation, until she admits that she does not live by experience but only by grasping the life of her characters in order to be always "as her part wants her". At the end of the play Donata accepts her private failure and yields to being only a body receiving and emanating the life of imaginary characters. When bereft of her characters, she is doomed to face an endless void:

It is terrible, the theatre just emptied and you cannot imagine how awful it was, walking into my dressing room, alone, empty headed, in that silence, in front of that great mirror on the table and those useless costumes and me sat there in the middle of the room, with drooping shoulders, my hands limp in my lap

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191. I am thinking in particular of Gordon Craig's *Übermarionette*, and Vsevolod Meyerhold's biomechanic actor.

192. On the image of Duse in Pirandello's works see Claudio Vicentini, *Pirandello: Il disagio del teatro* (Venice: Marsilio, 1993). Chapter 6: 'L'attore diventa un fantoccio'.

and my eyes wide open as I stared at myself in that emptiness.<sup>193</sup>

The actress who strives towards sacrifice and self-annihilation can reveal

An alluring emptiness, a perplexing materialization of the performance as an emptying out, nothing which comes of nothing: in the mirror without an image, the apotheosis of the absence.<sup>194</sup>

But if on the one hand the self effacing actress who projects an alluring emptiness cannot escape the destiny of a fetish, as the encroachment on Duse of a femme fatale stereotype seems to prove, on the other, she can also move towards the investigation of new roles and perspectives opened up to the female performer.

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As I have tried to argue, in the 1890s her gallery of wayward women allowed Duse to reveal the hidden keys of a fairly standard repertoire and discover the psychological dimension of acting by working on the subtext and against the grain of formulaic acting. This has become a central issue in the twentieth-century theories of acting. Investigating the textuality of the psyche and the psychological dimension of acting have placed the actor's self-realization at the core of theatre art.

The Dusian model of the actor whose self-realization is achieved by a continuous stripping down, emptying out,

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193. Pirandello, *Trovarsi*, in *Maschere nude*, 2 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1958), II, p.915.

194. Blau, p.2.



pouring out of one's soul, emerged especially in the theatre of the Polish actor and director Jerzy Grotowsky, where the actor creates his/her identity through the *via negativa*:

Not as a collection of skills, but as an eradication of blocks(...) the "ripening" of the actor is expressed by a tension towards the extreme, by a complete stripping down, by the laying bare of one's own intimacy - all this without the least trace of egotism or self-enjoyment.

This theatre also develops the idea of the actor who, like Duse/Donata makes a total gift of him/herself:

The actor makes a total gift of himself. This is a technique of the 'trance' and of the integration of all the actor's psychic and bodily powers which emerge from the most intimate layers of his being and instinct, springing forth in a sort of "translumination"(...) impulse and action are concurrent. The body vanishes burns and the spectator sees only a series of visible impulses.<sup>195</sup>

From a feminist perspective, the female performer who is caught up between self-negation and self-realization can open up to a rebirth and reinstate her identity. By ridding the stage of theatricality and staginess through self denial and death the actress can eventually find herself (*trovarsi*) as Hélène Cixous has suggested:

It is always necessary for a woman to die in order for the play to begin. Only when she has disappeared can the curtain go up (...) if the stage is woman, it will mean ridding the stage of theatricality. She will

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195. Jerzy Grotowsky, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1986), p.16.

want to be a body presence; it will therefore be necessary to work at exploding everything that makes for staginess, going beyond the confines of the stage, lessening our dependency on the visual and stressing the auditory, learning to attune all our ears (...) And if this stage/scene is movement (...) and Woman is Whole (...) instead of being acted out life is lived.<sup>196</sup>

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196. Hélène Cixous, 'Aller à la mer', trans. by Barbara Kerslake, *Modern Drama*, 27 (1984), 546-548.



## 6. CONCLUSION

This study has endeavoured to trace the history of Ristori and Duse's English careers and has focussed on their reception in Victorian England. Their English careers spanned years when the international touring circuit was flourishing as a result of technological improvements and more modern means of travel. They also spanned years when the woman question had become a major social issue: on account of the growing numbers of women who were entering the professional world the prevailing notions of women were being called into question.

A critical look at the status of actresses as professional women in Victorian theatre and society and at the reception of foreign stars in Victorian England has offered a basis for the evaluation of these two foreign female stars on the English stage and has also allowed me to argue for a re(de)construction of the image of the nineteenth-century actress. In the eyes of their contemporaries Victorian actresses appeared to be controversial figures, caught up in a duplicity that, echoing Diderot, I have described as the paradox of the actress who is admired as an object of visual consumption, but is doomed to be a social outcast. I have tried to show to what extent the reception of Ristori and Duse in Victorian England was influenced by contemporary prevailing views on actresses. As foreign actresses they encouraged critics to focus on certain issues, which as we have seen, ranged from the comparison between the organization of English and foreign theatre— often with a view to denouncing the shortcomings of the English theatre— to the comparison between foreign and English actresses' acting styles and repertoires.

In the critical discourse on Ristori a major feature seemed to be her ability to fit into the gilded stage and revive the palminess of the early nineteenth-century theatre by adopting a grand manner style and choosing larger-than-life characters which made her resemble an operatic prima donna. Duse's style and repertoire which were so

different from Ristori's inspired a different critical discourse, but nonetheless some common elements in their reception can be singled out, such as the recurring references to their southern conception of their characters and the melody of their voices, which in the eyes of critics created their exoticism.

Contemporary debate on English actresses was also a key element in shaping their image in England. As I have argued, Ristori's appeal and success was also due to her ability to recreate a model of ladylike actress when the issue of respectability was paramount in English theatre. If the English theatre was striving to set a high-minded tradition of player queens, then the appearance on the English stage of a foreign actress who could fit into that pattern could only be favourably received. In turn, the dominating image of the player queen at the time of her early tours in England affected Ristori's choice of repertoire and reinforced her queenly image. As a foremost representative of *grande attore* theatre, Ristori could equal the status of opera singers in a country such as England where opera was an entertainment of the highest status.

On the other hand, when Duse performed in England the issue of respectability was no longer a major one, with the exception of occasional backlashes such as Clement Scott's indictment of acting as a debasing profession for women in *Does the Theatre make for Good?*. However, the fin de siècle tendency to create disturbing and uncanny images of female performers and theatrical heroines, as exemplified in characters such as Paul Potter's *Trilby* and Arthur Pinero's *Agnes Ebbsmith*, affected the critical discourse on Duse, who was also caught up in the turn of the century debate on the New Woman. Her choice of an international repertoire which ranged from Sudermann to Ibsen along with a gallery of wayward women of the French theatre, which she stripped of their most stagey elements and offered to audiences as suffering modern women, strengthened the link between her and the English turn of the century, intellectual actresses.



Duse's acting style could not be fully evaluated by nineteenth-century standards, as recurring references to her acting in twentieth-century theories seem to prove, especially if set against Bernhardt who revived the grand manner style of Ristori and succeeded in amplifying elements of spectacle and exoticism. If, on the one hand, Duse's subdued tones and art-defying art made her disturbing in the eyes of conservative English critics, on the other it granted her success with critics such as William Archer who were committed to the renewal of the English stage and were involved in new ventures aimed at founding an English tradition of non-commercial, Art Theatre.

The existing literature on Ristori and Duse's foreign careers has often overlooked the complex role of the actress in the nineteenth century and their place in the international nineteenth-century stage and consists mainly of studies of their lives and careers with reference to some of their key interpretations.<sup>1</sup>

In England, despite a growing interest in nineteenth-century theatre in performance in general and in actresses in particular, which has been recently developed in academic circles and has been fostered by the editorial policy of some publishing houses, the career of many nineteenth-century female performers is still scantily documented and

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1. There are a few fairly complete biographies of Ristori which came out early in this century, such as Emma Parodi's, *Adelaide Ristori, Marchesa Capranica del Grillo* (Palermo: 1902), but there is no contemporary definitive biography. Since Ristori's descendants donated her extraordinary archive, which comprises numerous documents, such as letters, promptbooks, playbills, newspaper cuttings, along with costumes and stage props to the Actor's Museum in Genova a number of articles have been published in *Teatro Archivio* documenting her long and intense career, see especially issues 8 (1984) and 10 (1986). Her foreign career has, however, received very little attention with the exception of the articles by Giorcelli and Carlson on Ristori's English and American careers, listed in the bibliography to this thesis. Scholarly works on and biographies of Duse abound but her international career has not been adequately documented yet. As I write undergraduate students in Theatre History at the Istituto Universitario Orientale of Naples are researching Duse's Russian tours.



many others are still hidden from history.<sup>2</sup> If we turn to Italy, where Women's Studies as an academic discipline are still in a pioneering phase and do not enjoy the same status as in Anglophone countries, the amount of scholarly work produced on women in theatre is fairly limited.<sup>3</sup> The issues raised as early as 1981 by Nancy Reinhardt with a view to promoting a feminist perspective in academe still need to be tackled in the Italian academic world, especially as far as the study of women in theatre goes.<sup>4</sup>

This thesis has sought to argue that the study of foreign performers on the English stage can make an important contribution to the study of women and theatre in that it allows for an intercultural perspective, which I believe is crucial to the discussion of issues of representation and reception. I also believe that a cross-cultural study of women in performance could be effectively conducted with reference to foreign actresses who performed in Italy in the nineteenth century—the reverse standpoint from that chosen for this thesis and which I see, along with studies of lesser ladies of the nineteenth-century Italian stage who stand between the generation of Ristori and that of Duse, as possible follow-ups to this work. It would be interesting to research Sarah Bernhardt's tours in Italy, especially her Turin performances in 1882 which supposedly influenced Duse's early career. The careers of nineteenth century Italian actresses who did not achieve the same success as Ristori and Duse are still scantily documented.

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2. I think in particular of the 'Gender and Performance' series launched in 1991 by Routledge and the two-yearly journal *Women and Theatre* edited by M. Gale and S. Bassnett and published since 1992.

3. Giovanna Ciotti-Cavalletto's work on nineteenth-century Italian actresses and society published in 1978 is still the only full-length study on this topic while more recent contributions in the field of women and theatre are Laura Mariani's book on turn of the century actresses and women playwrights and Moretti and Costantini's short history of women in theatre, all listed in the bibliography to this thesis.

4. See note 7 of the Introduction to this thesis.



Among others, it would be worth researching Fanny Sadowsky, Ristori's contemporary and first Italian actress to choose the role of Marguerite Gautier, Virginia Marini and Virginia Reiter who entered the stage after Ristori and before Duse and marked the shift from Ristori's grand manner style towards Duse's fin de siècle realism.

## 7. APPENDIX

The appendix that follows lists Ristori's and Duse's London tours. Although both actresses, especially Ristori, toured the provinces extensively on their English tours, I have limited the following chronologies to their London tours for two main reasons. Firstly, it would have been extremely difficult to provide a comprehensive list of all their venues which included not only other major English cities such as Birmingham, Manchester and Newcastle but also, in Ristori's case, fairly small towns like Leamington Spa or holiday resorts like Scarborough. Secondly, in tracing their English careers in chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis, I have made extensive use only of reviews of their London performances.

### (i) RISTORI'S LONDON TOURS 1856-1883

1856 *Mirra*

*Medea*

*Pia dei Tolomei*

*Francesca da Rimini*

*Rosmunda*

*La locandiera*

*I gelosi fortunati*

Tour starts 4th June and ends 16th July at the Lyceum Theatre.

1857 *Medea*

*Rosmunda*

*La locandiera*

*I gelosi fortunati*

*Fazio*

*Camma*

*Macbetto*



*La collerica*

Tour starts 8th June and ends 8th August at the Lyceum Theatre.

1858 *Medea*

*Maria Stuarda*

*Macbetto*

*Fedra*

*Ottavia*

*Adriana Lecouvreur*

*Elisabetta d'Inghilterra*

Tour starts 16th June and ends 23rd July at the St. James's Theatre.

1863 *Medea*

*Elisabetta d'Inghilterra*

*Maria Stuarda*

*Adriana Lecouvreur*

*Macbetto*

*Rosmunda*

*Deborah (Leah)*

*Norma*

Tour starts 15th June and ends 13th July at Her Majesty's Theatre.

1873 *Medea*

*Maria Stuarda*

*Elisabetta d'Inghilterra*

*Maria Antonietta*

Tour starts 11th June and ends 16th July at the Drury Lane Theatre. After the London season Ristori starts a long tour of the provinces, to come back to London in October. Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene delivered as a set-piece in English on 28th October at the Opera Comique.

1882 *Macbeth*

*Queen Elizabeth*      both roles performed in English

Tour starts 3rd July end ends 29th July at Drury Lane Theatre.

1883 (Provincial tour)

*Macbeth*

*Queen Elizabeth*

all roles performed in English

*Mary Stuart*

*Marie Antoinette.*



## (ii) DUSE'S LONDON TOURS 1893-1923

1893 *Camille (La dame aux camélias)*

*La locandiera*

*Cavalleria rusticana*

*Casa di bambola (Nora)*

*Fedora*

*Antonio e Cleopatra*

*Divorziamo (Cyprienne)*

Tour starts 25th May and ends 5th July at the Lyceum Theatre.

1894 *La signora delle camélie*

*Divorziamo*

*La locandiera*

*Cavalleria rusticana*

Tour starts 7th May and ends 31st May at the Daly's Theatre.

1895 *La signora delle camélie*

*La moglie di Claudio*

*La locandiera*

*Cavalleria rusticana*

*Magda*

Tour starts 13th May and ends 13th July at the Drury Lane Theatre. *La locandiera* and *Cavalleria Rusticana* performed 7th June at the Savoy.

1900 *Magda*

*La seconda moglie (The Second Mrs Tanqueray)*

*La Gioconda*

*Fedora*

*La Princesse Georges*

*La signora delle camellie*

Tour starts 10th May, ends 18th June at the Lyceum.

1903 *La Gioconda*

*Magda*

*Hedda Gabler*

*Francesca da Rimini*

*La signora delle camellie*

*La Princesse Georges*

*La seconda moglie*

Tour starts 5th October and ends 5th November at the Adelphi Theatre.

1905 *La seconda moglie*

*Magda*

*La signora delle camellie*

*Hedda Gabler*

*La moglie di Claudio*

*La locandiera*

*La visita di nozze*

*Adriana Lecouvreur*

*Odette*

*La Gioconda*

*Fedora*



Tour starts 23rd May and ends 8th July at the Waldorf Theatre.

1923 *La donna del mare*

*Spettri*

*Così sia*

Tour starts 7th June and ends 26th June at the New Oxford Theatre.

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