

**'THUS LET ME WIPE DISHONOUR FROM MY NAME': PEG WOFFINGTON AS
LOTHARIO IN *THE FAIR PENITENT***

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On January 29th 1753 at Smock Alley playhouse in Dublin, Peg Woffington performed in drag as Lothario in Nicholas Rowe's tragedy *The Fair Penitent* (Greene 1.317). Although Rowe's Lothario was not entirely original (the name had already been used to describe a similar character in the novel *Don Quixote*) he was, if anything, even less sympathetic than his Spanish cousin. While Cervantes' character was a reluctant seducer, Rowe's was an arrogant libertine who ruins the heroine, Calista, chiefly out of revenge. Lothario was a tall order for an actress, then, even one as experienced as Woffington. Her performances inspired mixed reactions. "I never was witness to so preposterous attempt as her Lothario" carped her co-star, West Digges, "she neither had spirit nor figure for the part. All that warm luxuriousness of description, which so strongly marks what a Lothario should be, came from her with finical delicacy, that, while it offended the ear, insulted the understanding" (qtd Foot 82). She later reprised her performance at Covent Garden playhouse in London, where the reception was even less enthusiastic than in Ireland.

Although briefly mentioned in theatrical calendars such as John C. Greene's *Theatre in Dublin 1745-1820* and by Woffington's biographers, her performance as a travesty villain has only been considered in detail by three scholars (Kristina Straub, Felicity Nussbaum and Helen E. M. Brooks), and then chiefly from a gender perspective. While these studies are unquestionably valuable to theatre historians they also risk narrowing the view, distancing us from traditionally thorny issues such as the extent of an actress's agency and her possible motivations. How far was Woffington a conscious disrupter of gender and how far the servant of commercial trends? What do Woffington's performances tell us about a player's status? What could be gained by mapping a comic style onto a tragedy, and what does her failure tell us about the state of the stage at mid-century?

This essay not only uses a biographical approach to shed light on these questions, it also explores Woffington's career from a cultural perspective. What is particularly interesting about her performance of Lothario is that it occurred during a period of changing audience tastes. While many still enjoyed robust Restoration comedies by writers such as John Vanbrugh, there had been a growing trend for the drama of sensibility, which manifested itself in the gentler comedies of Colley Cibber and Richard Steele, as well as a growing emphasis on the pathetic heroines of she-tragedy. The popularity of these apparently morally-improving works coincided with attempts (pioneered by two great actor-managers, David Garrick and Thomas Sheridan) to 'professionalise' acting. Woffington's relationships with both men are important, but the focus of theatre historians has traditionally been on her romantic relationship with Garrick and their split in the 1740s. In contrast, this essay explores her professional relationship with Sheridan in the context of her performance as Lothario, which first took place under his auspices at Smock Alley playhouse. These under-examined links with Sheridan are, I believe, the key to understanding one of the oddest experiments on the Georgian stage.

Back in 1740, Woffington had taken London by storm with her cross-dressed performances. She began her career in Dublin, where she was born around 1717 (Philp H. Highfill, et al., 195). Not much is known about her early years or her family, although it seems that her father died when she was young, leaving her mother (an Irish Catholic called Hannah) in reduced circumstances, faced with raising Peg and her infant sister Mary alone. In an incident much romanticised by Victorian biographers, Woffington received her big break working with the rope-dancer Signora Violante, although chiefly as a dancer-actress rather than a funambulist (we can discount Augustin Daly's claim that Woffington was one of the babies in baskets tied to Violante's feet during a tightrope walk, not least because she was at least 12 years' old at the time). Violante had first come to Dublin in 1729 and later opened a series of theatrical booths. Woffington's ability to dance, sing and act made her a useful member of the company in the wake of John Gay's enormous theatrical hit *The Beggar's*

Opera (premiered in London in 1728), and it is in the context of ballad opera, rather than tumbling, that we can best understand Woffington's early career. In fact, it was in a children's production of *The Beggar's Opera*, staged by Violante in Dublin and London, that Woffington made her first on-stage travesty appearance: as the highwayman Macheath (Philp H. Highfill, et al., 197).

Once Violante left Dublin around 1733, Woffington transferred to Dublin's Aungier Street playhouse and the first extant mention of her is in May 1735, as a dancer between the acts. Woffington's multiple skills came in useful, yet again, in a programme dominated by ballad operas, though she soon branched out into acting roles, such as Oriana (who disguises herself in boy's clothes to save her lover from an ignominious death) in George Farquhar's *The Inconstant*. Woffington's talents were always chiefly in comedy, and that is mainly how she has been remembered. Her tall, slender figure made her a good candidate for cross-dressed roles but she was renowned, too, for her beauty and personal charisma, excelling as the well-born, witty heroines of Restoration comedy (Figure 1). Farquhar's works were particularly suited to her and she shone as his heroine Silvia in *The Recruiting Officer*, who disguises herself as a soldier and follows her beloved, Captain Plume, into the army, winning both his respect and his heart.

This was the theatrical 'line' that Woffington brought with her to London in 1740. She was following directly in the footsteps of an earlier generation of actresses such as Anne Oldfield (the creator of Silvia in *The Recruiting Officer*) and the graceful dancer-actress Hester Santlow, both of whom were known for playing cross-dressed comedy heroines. Because breeches on women necessarily revealed the shape of the body more than a full skirt, these roles had a risqué reputation, and it was this combination of titillation and cross-dressing that we see exemplified in the career of Eleanor ('Nell') Gwyn, who, as one of the first generation of women to appear on-stage after the Restoration, can be understood as the originator of the tradition. For better or worse, parallels between Woffington (who was scandalously connected with several aristocratic lovers) and Gwyn (whose status as King Charles II's mistress is well known), would be consistently drawn, both on stage and off, throughout the 18th century and beyond. Military representations were another speciality of Woffington's, which that came in handy during the Jacobite Uprising of 1745 when she was often called upon to perform a patriotic - and risqué - epilogue as a 'Female Volunteer' (Figure 2).

Of all her male characterisations, however, Woffington was chiefly famous for Farquhar's "airy gentleman" Sir Harry Wildair in *The Constant Couple or A Trip to the Jubilee*. Farquhar acknowledged Robert Wilks's excellence as this foppish character, saying "Mr Wilks's performance has set him so far above competition in the part of Wildair, that none can pretend to envy the praise due to his merit. That he made the part will appear from hence, that whenever the stage has the misfortune to lose him, Sir Harry Wildair may go to the Jubilee" (qtd Archer 35-6).¹ In a long-held theatrical tradition, once a role was played successfully by an actor or actress it remained their property until they either retired or died. After Wilks's death in 1732, Farquhar's assertion that nobody could match him seemed more than a rhetorical flourish, since no actor had managed to distinguish himself in the role. Then on April 25th 1740, in Dublin, Woffington played it *en travesti* and probably out of necessity, given the lack of good roles for women. She was an instant hit and the role remained hers for the next 20 years.

The only surviving image of Woffington as Sir Harry is, unfortunately, problematic (Figure 3). This mezzotint (from a drawing now lost and said, in 1875, to be by William Hogarth) shows her three-quarter-length with one hand inside her waistcoat. However, another, almost identical, engraving by William Edgar Marshall, held by the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington D.C., claims to depict Nell Gwyn. Woffington's

performances occasioned a famous anecdote, taken here from W. R. Chetwood, which shows the blurring between her appearances as Sir Harry and her scandalous off-stage reputation:

This agreeable Actress in the Part of Sir Harry coming into the Green-Room, said pleasantly, *In my Conscience, I believe half the Men in the House take me for one of their own Sex.* Another Actress reply'd, *It may be so, but in my Conscience the other Half can convince them to the Contrary.* (256)²

By playing Lothario, then, Woffington was attempting to build on her popularity as Sir Harry Wildair, as well as transfer her travesty skills to a tragedy.

The Fair Penitent had not been a success on its debut in 1703 at Lincoln's Inn Fields; however, after a gap of 11 seasons it was revived and remained a popular staple throughout the 18th century as audiences increasingly turned to moralistic themes.³ The early years of the 18th century also marked a trend towards tragedies with women at their centre (now known as 'she-tragedies'). Initially, Rowe drew his material from Philip Massinger and Nathan Field's *The Fatal Dowry* (1632), but softened this tale of female sexual duplicity, turning Calista into the familiar she-tragedy victim and Lothario into the villain. In Rowe's play, Calista has been promised in marriage to Altamont. However, Lothario - Altamont's enemy - has already seduced and abandoned her. Altamont's brother-in-law, Horatio, suspects that Calista loves Lothario, and, discovering them in a garden, kills him in a duel. Entering upon the chaos, Calista's father, Sciolto, goes to kill Calista to "wipe Dishonour from my Name" but is prevented and instead banishes her to a dark cell. The final act discovers Calista in a "Room hung with black", sitting beside Lothario's body. Hearing that Sciolto has been attacked by Lothario's men, she stabs herself.

The first Lothario had been George Powell, who played opposite the great Thomas Betterton as Horatio and Elizabeth Barry as Calista (*London Stage Database*). As indicated by this billing, Lothario was not the focus of the plot but a foil to Horatio, the hero of the play. Nevertheless, the role of Lothario was occasionally used in interesting ways, not least in 1746 when David Garrick's Lothario morphed into a theatrical contest between himself and the venerable James Quin as Horatio. The actors themselves probably did not intend to rival one another, but Covent Garden's wily manager, John Rich, likely capitalised on the obvious comparison between Quin's declamatory style and Garrick's apparently 'naturalistic' approach. Audiences flocked to see them and the play was a huge success.

As for female Lotharios, Woffington was not the first woman to have played the role. Charlotte Charke (the eccentric daughter of the playwright, actor and manager, Colley Cibber) had donned breeches as Lothario in June 1734 at London's Little Haymarket theatre. Charke was the pre-eminent travesty performer of the early 18th century, who also cross-dressed and adopted male personas off-stage (for a time she lived as 'Charles Brown'). She was chiefly a comic performer, but occasionally appeared *en travesti* in tragedies such as Rodrigo in *Othello* and as Macheath in a 'tragedized' version of *The Beggar's Opera* (given that all the performers wore togas, the effect may have been more comic than they had intended). According to her biographer, Kathryn Shevelow, Charke's appearance as Lothario coincided with her experiments in off-stage cross-dressing; the role was perhaps significant to her for this reason and she chose it for her benefit night at the James Street Theatre in 1744 (Shevelow 188, 306).

Woffington had previously played Calista, but the role was evidently not a triumph since she only played it once in London, during the 1748-9 season, and once in Dublin, during the 1751-2 season. What were her reasons, then, for playing Calista's seducer, the "gay, perfidious Libertine"? One thing is certain: it was not because audiences had grown tired of seeing her play Sir Harry Wildair. In fact, data taken from the *London Stage*

Database show that the frequency of Woffington's appearances as Sir Harry remained high right until her enforced retirement in 1757. Certainly, news of her intention to play Lothario would have swelled the receipts at Smock Alley, as well as introducing an element of creativity that set Thomas Sheridan's programming apart from that of the London playhouses. But there was something more sophisticated than novelty value behind this decision.

First, though, we must understand how 18th-century audiences would have viewed female travesty roles. Helen E. M. Brooks has persuasively argued that they were seen in androgynous terms, since gossip about the actress's life (in Woffington's case, her teasing and heartless treatment of her lovers) could be layered onto the performances, making room for ironic comment on the double-standards applied to male and female behaviour (Brooks 63-92). Her androgynous appeal is clear from some of the tributes that appeared in the presses on her debut in 1740:

That excellent Peg!
Who showed such a leg
When lately she dressed in men's clothes,
A creature uncommon
Who's both man and woman
And the chief of the belles and the beaux! (qtd Daly 19)

This ironic, multi-layered mode of performance was not possible in breeches roles (such as Silvia), where the female character is simply disguised as a man and reverts to her true identity at the end of the play. In fact, Brooks goes a step further to argue that breeches roles, far from being uncomfortable for audiences, simply reinforced biological divisions between the sexes because much of the comedy arises when the character's natural femininity almost gives away her disguise (think of Viola in *Twelfth Night* trying to hide her terror and ineptitude during a duel). No such interplay happens in a travesty role, where the actress's performance undermines conventional assumptions about the sexes by using (in Brooks's phrase) a "camp sensibility" (70).

What also makes Woffington's choice of Lothario particularly interesting is that there is evidence that attitudes towards cross-dressing actresses were shifting in the middle decades of the century. Benjamin Victor's advice to young actresses in 1771 shows just how much nervousness had begun to creep into travesty performances. While praising Woffington as Sir Harry, he is reluctant to encourage other actresses to follow in her footsteps:

... [Woffington] had Beauty, Shape, Wit and Vivacity, equal to any theatrical Female in any Time, and capable of any Undertaking in the Province of Comedy, nay of deceiving, and warming into Passion, any of her own Sex, if she had been unknown, and introduced as a young Baronet just returned from his Travels - but still, I say, admirable and admired as she was in this Part, I would not have any other Female of the Stage attempt the Character after her; the wearing of Breeches merely to pass for a Man, as is the Case in many Comedies, is as far as the Metamorphosis ought to go, and indeed, more than some formal Critics will allow of; but that Custom is established into a Law, and as there is great Latitude in it, it should not be in the least extended - when it is, you *o'erstep the Modesty of Nature*, and when that is done, whatever may be the Applause within Doors, you will be injured by Remarks and Criticisms without. (Victor 3.6-7; original emphasis)

Woffington was obviously a special case when it came to travesty roles, since the public still keenly attended her performances of Sir Harry Wildair, and the actress Ann Spranger Barry continued to play the role after Woffington's death in 1760 (Figure 4). Nevertheless, the undercurrent of same-sex eroticism was worrying for Victor, and if we set these concerns in the context of playing a travesty role in a tragedy, we begin to see how bold it really was. For the hack author of Woffington's *Memoirs* (probably John Hill), writing in 1760, it certainly inspired a powerful disgust. "The Success our Heroine had met with in playing *Sir Harry Wildair* encouraged her to attempt *Lothario*," he begins. Those who usually liked her performances complimented her, but the most "judicious" members of the audience:

... evidently proved, that any Sentence, which came from the Mouth of the *supposed Lothario*, lost its Force, by being played by a Woman; and they as evidently demonstrated that it was impossible for the Mind to be so far possessed with Delusion, as to forget the Reality, that it was a *Woman* that played the Character; and consequently, that the Sentiments, the Conduct and the Actions of the personated *Lothario*, seemed to be a mere vain Attempt to represent Things which formerly *had been*, instead of convincing the Spectators that the Scenes they saw before them were *then* real. ([Hill] 30-31; original emphasis)

In contrast to comedies, where double-entendre and knowing winks could hold in place the contradictions of the character and actress's body, tragedies are founded on emotions of sorrow, fear and anxiety, and, above all, thrive on realism (Brooks 78). For the writer quoted above, the male/female doubling at work in Woffington's comic travesty performances was not only destroyed in tragedy but haunted by "Things which formerly *had been*" (meaning memories of Sir Harry Wildair), all of which conspired to ruin the illusion of reality.

What, we might ask, was the purpose of this curious experiment, and how far was it Woffington's own decision or the result of managerial intervention?

To answer the first question we have to look at the wider cultural landscape. Throughout the early years of the 18th century there had been a trend towards 'sensibility' in which the cynical, sexualised aspects of the drama were remodelled or removed. By the 1750s a new narrative about the morally improving aims of theatre had gained currency. The rise of this trend was charted by Ernest Bernbaum's landmark study *The Drama of Sensibility*, in which he wrote of a "new ethics" based on a "confidence in the goodness of average human nature" (Bernbaum 2). Bernbaum showed how sensibility flourished in 18th-century drama via two forms, sentimental comedy and domestic tragedy, both of which rejected the pessimism of the Restoration worldview. In sentimental comedy, the wrongs of the protagonists were corrected, not by ridicule, but by virtuous actions, while in tragedy, heroes and heroines were undone by fate, not by inherent weakness.

Writing in 1925, Allardyce Nicoll echoed Bernbaum's comments and characterised domestic tragedy as a progressive form (compared to the classical or heroic tragedy), citing Rowe as its true source (Nicoll 114-117). Focussing on the 18th-century audience, Leo Hughes went further, separating the idea of sentimentality from moral prudishness and showing how, as the century advanced, the numbers of people focussed on virtue as the proper aim of drama increased (Hughes 134). The importance of tragedy to the "new ethics" is typified by the Earl of Chesterfield's address to "ladies" in 1775, when he advised them to "...never go to a play that is the least offensive to delicacy. Tragedies subject you to no such inconveniences. When you go to the Theatre, then, let it be to a tragedy, whose exalted sentiments will ennoble your heart, and whose affecting scenes will soften it" (Chesterfield 2.87).

By the time she appeared as Lothario in *The Fair Penitent*, Woffington's career was already headed towards the tragic repertoire. She was aged around 37 in 1753 and probably calculated that audiences would not accept her for much longer as the youthful, comic heroine.⁴ As well as responding to new tastes, the material may also have appealed to her because tragedies were seen as artistically elevated. Susan Staves, writing about the genre in her chapter for *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre*, remarked that tragedy "was an important subject in the period's literary scholarship, theory and criticism" as well as being the place where theatrical reputations were forged (Staves 87). Although tragedy was still less of a box-office draw than comedy, it was refined and bore the stamp of artistic seriousness. With this in mind, Woffington's performance as Lothario can be understood as an attempt to underline her professional status, and that of the theatrical profession in general, by transposing early successes onto weightier and more 'ethical' material.

We would be wrong in thinking, however, that *The Fair Penitent* functioned simply a moral caution to young women à la Lord Chesterfield. In fact, tragedy (and she-tragedy in particular) held a contradiction at its heart which is important to consider alongside claims for its morality. As Jean I. Marsden has shown, she-tragedy was a genre in which the heroine is "established as desirable, and then driven into prolonged and often fatal suffering" for the voyeuristic pleasure of the audience (Marsden 60). Marsden explains how these plays invited the spectator to gaze on the heroine's body, while the actress herself was presented as passive with her eyes averted, or perhaps sleeping, her clothes and hair in disarray. The more extreme examples of the heroine's suffering - rape, incest - were typically supposed to have happened off-stage, with a lengthy speech lingering over the details. On the surface, Marsden argues, she-tragedy was clothed in respectability (albeit scantily at times) but the inconsistencies between the way men and women were expected to consume it alert us to a hidden agenda. Whereas men were invited to gaze on the titillating spectacle of the fallen women, ladies were expected to learn from it.

Given the erotic undertow of she-tragedy and its complex appeal to middle-class virtues, it is hardly surprising that Woffington's cross-dressed performance was a step too far for some, including the author of her 1760 *Memoirs*. Once the naughty wink that said "I'm a rake on-stage and off!" was removed, Woffington's villain was simply, and troublingly, homoerotic. Consider for a moment how this classic device from *The Fair Penitent*, in which Calista's seduction is described by Lothario, would have been received in a transvestite performance:

I found the Fond, Believing, Love-sick Maid,
Loose, unattir'd, warm, tender, full of Wishes;
Fierceness and Pride, the Guardians of her Honour,
Were charm'd to Rest, and Love alone was waking.
[...]
I snatch'd the glorious, golden Opportunity,
And with prevailing, youthful Ardour prest her,
'Till with short Sighs, and murmuring Reluctance,
The yielding Fair one gave me perfect Happiness. (Dobrée 315)

Garrick's biographer, Thomas Davies, hinted at Woffington's failure as a tragedy rake by observing that "whether she was as greatly accomplished in the manly tread of the buskined libertine, as she was in the gay gentleman in comedy, I know not; but it is certain that she did not meet with the same approbation in the part of Lothario, as in that of Wildair" (Davies 1.342). Not everyone found her performance problematic, though, and the varied responses to her Lothario in Dublin, and later, in London, should remind us that ideas about

gender did not unfold on a linear progress throughout the 18th century from fluid to biologically determined. As Felicity Nussbaum points out, people watching Woffington's performance would have found it "impossible to forget the female body beneath the rakish clothing" (224-225), but for some this was precisely the appeal. Consider this tribute titled 'The Vision':

All adroit, each taper Thigh enclos'd
In manly Vestments, with Parisian step;
Light as the bounding Doe she tripp'd along,
The gay LOTHARIO, in his Age of Joy.
Venus surpriz'd, thus whisper'd 'Let me die,
If dear ADONIS wore a lovelier Form.'
Then clasp'd the Youth-dres'd Damsel to her Breast,
And sighing, murmur'd, *O that for my Sake*
Thou wert this Instant what thou represents. (qtd Brooks 76)

Nevertheless, as we can see from the work of cultural historian Dror Wahrman, who has looked in detail at attitudes to actresses playing Sir Harry Wildair after Woffington's death, ideas about gender were gradually changing, pushing travesty roles out of fashion.⁵ What the enduring appeal of Woffington's Sir Harry, and reactions like the above poem, suggest is that people had a greater tolerance for gender playfulness in a theatrical context, compared to elsewhere, and they also were particularly tolerant of Woffington's imitations of masculinity, compared to other actresses. By 1831, when James Boaden published his *Life of Dorothy Jordan* (one of Woffington's cross-dressing successors), the female travesty performance had been utterly sublimated into a pale imitation of masculinity. Boaden wrote that "When Woffington took [the role of Sir Harry] up, she did what she was not aware of, namely that the audience permitted the actress to *purify* the character, and enjoyed the language from a woman, which might have disgusted from a man" (1.127). In other words, a convincing portrayal was impossible.

There is biographical evidence, however, that Woffington intended to achieve an incredibly lifelike, realistic performance of Rowe's villain. Back in 1753 her partnership with Thomas Sheridan (then manager of Smock Alley playhouse and her co-star, as Horatio, in *The Fair Penitent*) throws interesting light on the conundrum.

If there is one person who embodies the contradictions of respectability, status and the 18th-century stage, it is Sheridan, whose career in Ireland was defined by a battle to clear his theatre of troublemakers and turn acting into a respectable profession. In his perceptive monograph of the actor-manager, Conrad Brunström highlights an interesting contradiction between Woffington and another actress, Sarah Siddons, whom Sheridan sponsored later in his life. In Brunström's assessment "...Woffington was the polar opposite of the player Sheridan could claim the merit of discovering and sponsoring in his old age, Sarah Siddons, whose "unconventional" offstage femininity and domesticity marked a decisive break with theatrical convention" (49). Unlike Woffington, the decorum that Siddons projected was achieved by creating a division between the player and the role. "With the active cooperation of Sarah Siddons, Sheridan helped create an ideal of audience involvement based on a new and radical form of bifurcation whereby the very distinction between the player and the role emphasized the idea of her talent. This distinction was also reinforced in terms of a stage that limited the nature of her encounter with an audience" (Brunström 49). While Siddons could be gazed at on-stage, her private life was unavailable for scrutiny: "Within the frame of the proscenium arch at Drury Lane (and elsewhere on tour), Siddons was available to the eye and ear, though never to the touch" (Brunström 49). Woffington, whose comic performances

tended to draw on her back-story (and in the case of Sir Harry Wildair, relied upon it) was the exact opposite of this approach. In fact, Woffington's on-stage personas, in common with earlier actresses such as Nell Gwyn, were heavily self-referential and, given the flimsy divisions between players and audience in the 18th century, her appearances relied on a certain *frisson* of sexual availability.

In answering the second question - how far was Woffington's Lothario the result of managerial intervention? - it seems to me that Sheridan's influence was crucial. Seen in the context of Siddons, Woffington's appearance as a tragedy rake was clearly an attempt by the manager to raise Woffington's professional status by drawing a division between the real woman and the artistry of acting. Despite the opportunities for camp *double entendre* in Woffington's comic travesty performances, we only need recall Victor's panic about her "warming into Passion, any of her own Sex" to see that in 1771 realism (and therefore deception) was still a possibility for audiences. The fact that at least part of the Dublin audience in 1753 was ready to be fooled by a female impersonator was seized by Sheridan, not to bolster the myths but to display Woffington's talent. This could be attempted more easily in tragedy, since, unlike comedy, it thrived on realism and artistic seriousness.

The possibility that Woffington could pull the wool over ordinary people's eyes is backed up by early biographies, which contain many stories of her subversive off-stage antics. Take, for example, the 1760 *Memoirs*. We are told that Woffington was involved with the aristocratic rake Theobald Taaffe (his name is disguised in the original to protect the author from legal action). She follows Taaffe to London, and, on discovering his intention to marry another woman with whom he has fallen in love, she "dressed in Man's Apparel, and, attended by a Footman, resolved upon all the Means in her Power to break off the Marriage" ([Hill] 23). Having made the lady's acquaintance under false pretenses, Woffington attends a ball at her house where she attracts the attention of the whole company as an accomplished dancer and a "pretty Gentleman" ([Hill] 24). Taaffe's fiancée - captivated by the young 'man' - is quickly taken into 'his' confidence, allowing Woffington to drop the bomb that Taaffe is "a most abandoned Libertine". Thus, Taaffe's plan to marry the woman are destroyed ([Hill] 24). Thespian biographies were characterised by narratives such as these, and although we may now regard them as fictionalised, this seductive blurring of stage and real life was not only common, it was crucial to the development of celebrity (Wanko).

Through the medium of modern biography, where the steps and missteps of a career can be seen from a distance, motivations emerge. Woffington's interest in tragedy suggests that she longed for a professional status that was more in keeping with male contemporaries such as Sheridan or Garrick. Unfortunately, using Lothario as a bid for respectability was doomed to fail, not least because travesty roles, in the Restoration tradition, involve doubling of identities and ironic distancing, rather than naturalism and the illusion of reality. Knowledge held by Dublin audiences at the time - such as the fact that Woffington was, scandalously, President of a Beefsteak Club for Sheridan's male supporters - only served to reinforce the popular image of her as a roistering female rake. These off-stage activities constantly undercut Sheridan's attempts to re-focus audiences on her professional skills. One of the frustrations of Woffington's short career, cut off by an eventually fatal illness beginning in 1757, was that she had forged her celebrity on essentially Restoration techniques, which, by the 1750s, had become less relevant to middle-class spectators. The choice of Lothario was one of several attempts by Woffington to respond to changing tastes and - with Sheridan's help - to foreground her status as a respected professional. If she had lived past her forties, she would probably have ended up a very different artist to the one who debuted, in 1740, as Farquhar's "airy gentleman".

Notes

¹ Farquhar brought out his comedy (the full title of which is *The Constant Couple; or A Trip to the Jubilee*) in 1700, which was the Jubilee year at Rome. This time in the Catholic calendar is characterised by the forgiveness of sins and a celebration of God's mercy. Aside from the title there are no references to the Jubilee in the play; one assumes that Farquhar simply took advantage of this event to make his work sound current. Farquhar's cryptic reference in the play's Preface to when the stage had the misfortune to lose Wilks, "Sir Harry Wildair may go to the Jubilee" was a way of saying "nobody will play this role better than Wilks". In other words, when Wilks stopped playing him, the rakish Sir Harry might as well go to Rome and get his sins forgiven, for he ceased to exist in the minds of both author and audience.

² The joke appears in myriad sources with the punchline variously attributed to James Quin and Kitty Clive.

³ Data from the *London Stage Database* accessed in March 2020 show 327 performances of *The Fair Penitent*, including adaptations and associated titles, between 1702 and 1800. A peak around 1745 chimes with the interest in female-centred tragedies as a mode of patriotic expression during the Jacobite Uprising.

⁴ Her birth year is uncertain, with different sources giving dates as various as 1717, 1718, 1720 and 1721.

⁵ Wahrman notes that "In two and a half years between May 1788 and October 1790, Wildair appeared on the London stage twenty-eight times, acted either by Mrs. Jordan or by two other actresses, but never by a male actor. The subsequent reversal was striking: the following equivalent period saw the play staged only once – and then with a *man* playing Wildair, not a woman" (51; original emphasis).

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