The Angel in the Theatre: Ellen Terry and Olga Nethersole as Liminal Victorian Performers

Anna Kristine Daines Rennaker
Brigham Young University - Provo

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd
Part of the Classics Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/5660

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
The Angel in the Theatre: Ellen Terry and Olga Nethersole as Liminal Victorian Performers

Anna Kristine Daines Rennaker

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Allen Christenson, Chair Francesca Lawson Carl Sederholm

Department of Comparative Arts and Letters Brigham Young University

May 2015

Copyright © 2015 Anna Kristine Daines Rennaker All Rights Reserved
ABSTRACT

The Angel in the Theatre: Ellen Terry and Olga Nethersole as Liminal Victorian Performers

Anna Kristine Daines Rennaker
Department of Comparative Arts and Letters, BYU
Master of Arts

The late nineteenth century British stage was hopelessly confused. It couldn’t decide whether it was London’s principle source of entertainment—mainstream and respectable enough for Queen Victoria herself to patronize—or the seedbed of all corruption and deviance in Victorian society. At the center of this split identity was the actress, a figure both well-beloved (in the case of stars like Ellen Terry) and the literal embodiment of everything a Victorian women shouldn’t be—loose, sexualized, and working (in the case of her contemporary, Olga Nethersole). Because of this liminal position, Victorian actresses thus create a fascinating microcosm in which to study the implications of performativity and performance in late nineteenth century society. I argue that stars like Terry and Nethersole, though they did so by opposite means, deliberately performed multiple roles, both on stage and in society, in order to enjoy the autonomy they craved—one unavailable to the majority of Victorian women.

The biographies of both actresses reveal compelling paradoxes. Terry, though respected enough to be compared to the “ideal” Victorian woman (the proverbial “Angel in the House”), was in reality a fallen woman. Olga Nethersole, on the other hand, built her career on playing fallen woman roles, yet lived an upright and unremarkable private life. Despite these differences, however, both women rose to great heights of fame and earned careers, funds, and power over their lives and relationships that most women of the century would never dream of. This thesis investigates the anomaly of autonomous Victorian actresses through the lens of performance theory. Drawing upon the concepts of liminality and social performativity, introduced largely by performance studies scholars like Richard Schechner and Marvin Carlson, I work toward a practical connection between performance on the stage and performativity in society that remains largely unexplored in the field of Victorian theatrical studies. Ultimately, I am shedding light on the paradoxical, dual function of performance; as demonstrated in the lives of these two actresses, it has the potential to simultaneously reinforce societal norms and to protest against them.

Keywords: Ellen Terry, Olga Nethersole, Victorian theatre, performance theory, actresses, liminality
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I’ve been attending Brigham Young University for a good eight years (with some
globetrotting stints thrown in for good measure), and I never would have emerged at the end of
them with a Masters Degree without the help, encouragement, and slight pressure of the
following individuals. First, I thank Allen Christenson, who believed in me and made me want to
believe in myself. As my thesis chair, he never ran out of enthusiasm, humorous anecdotes, and
just plain kindness. Not to mention that, on his invitation, my semester in London fueled and
informed my research immeasurably. Doctors Sederholm and Lawson rounded out the ideal
committee with their sincere interest, vast scholarly knowledge, and unfailing empathy.

At home, Jacob Andrew Rennaker served as my best editor, friend, and partner. I
wouldn’t do much writing (or anything else, for the matter) without the motivating influence of
his love. Thank you to the rest of my family—and to my parents in particular—for always
supporting my pursuits, scholarly and otherwise. Thanks for reading to me, Mama.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: identities to perform.................................................................1
Performing cultural norms and protests..........................................................4
Identities: Angels (and Devils) on the stage....................................................10
Olga Nethersole and performing identities....................................................19
The liminality of the performing angel: norms and protests..........................25
Introduction: identities to perform

Late Victorian England was so smitten with Ellen Terry that it was popular for young men in the 1880s to propose by saying, “Well, if Ellen Terry won’t marry me, will you?” (Melville 9). Playwright George Bernard Shaw expressed his Terry fever by beginning a letter “Ellen Ellen Ellen Ellen Ellen Ellen Ellen Ellen Ellen Ellenor Ellenest Terry” (St. John). Men and women alike obsessed over the actress (she was frequently mobbed in the streets), and she was viewed with an almost religious reverence: Oscar Wilde, with his characteristic wryness, made her a patron saint of the theatre by referring to her as “Our Lady of the Lyceum” (Auerbach 195). And yet, Terry’s early life was anything but saintly; she lived with a lover, had two illegitimate children by him, and eventually was married a total of three times—actions which firmly established her in the category of the quintessential Victorian “fallen woman.” How then, in an era characterized by prudery, and in a profession carrying centuries of connotations of moral indecency, did Ellen Terry rise to such extreme heights of fame and adoration?

The Victorian actress, and Terry in particular, is a fascinating figure in cultural studies because she—as Terry’s star status confirms—eschews the typically strict Victorian dichotomy of the ideally virtuous woman (the “Angel in the House,” as Coventry Patmore famously coined) and the helplessly “fallen woman,” forever lost to decent society. In fact, the figure of the actress perfectly embodies performance theory’s concept of “liminality,” which Jon Mckenzie claims is “[key] to articulating the efficacy of both cultural performance and performance studies” (McKenzie 27). That is, the Victorian actress inherently lived in a state of “in-betweenness;” as a working woman she fit neither the feminine ideal of the gentle domestic goddess, nor the stereotype of the destitute fallen woman. Indeed, as George Bernard Shaw explained of the Victorian actress in his preface to the compilation of correspondence between Terry and himself:
[T]he actress did not live in ordinary society and go out to her work like a doctor or lawyer, or clergyman or man of business: she belonged to a little world apart, with morals of its own… [I]n the outside world ladies were not economically independent… On the stage not only was the actress self-supporting, but if, as often happened, she attracted the public more than her male colleagues she was paid more. (xi)

Somehow, Terry lived in a “world apart” as a celebrated actress. Despite the fallen nature of her personal life, she was accepted and adored in her profession, even seen as something of an “Angel in the Theatre.” I argue, using the case studies of Terry and her foil of a contemporary, Olga Nethersole, that star actresses deliberately performed multiple social identities in order to establish their autonomous “world apart.” Although Terry and Nethersole chose different roles—the Angel and the Fallen Woman, respectively—they did so for the same ends. They were able to perform their way into a freedom unimaginable to most women of their era.

It is vital to note that attaining a “fallen woman” status was a very real danger for most actresses, especially considering the historical trope of the actress-turned-whore that persisted well into the twentieth century (the history of which I will discus in detail later). There was a firm stigma in Victorian society with regard to the morality of actresses. In Tempted London, a series of articles published in 1888, the erotic effect of the actress on the Victorian man is discussed in detail: “…her hair flowing loosely in extravagant luxuriance down her back, her white arms bared to the shoulder, her neck and bosom by no means jealously guarded from the vulgar gaze, he loses his head in the enchantment of her presence, and carries away a mental impression of her which can do him no good and may do him much harm” (British Weekly 278).

Besides vividly describing the figure of the actress in erotic language, this comment carries a
latent double entendre of the femme fatale power to emasculate—the actress causes her patron to “lose his head.” Indeed, because of the constant association of the actress as a sexual object in the mind of the public, she was ingrained in society as such, and had little hope to be seen as anything else.

Interestingly, some of Terry’s contemporaries—of which I will focus on English-born American actress Olga Nethersole—capitalized on the sexual connotations of the actress. Whereas Terry escaped the life of a fallen woman by primarily portraying mainstream (and thus acceptable) Shakespearean heroines, Nethersole titillated her audiences with portrayals of fallen women. She even turned a reconciliation scene at the sick bed of a child into what one critic deemed a “salacious…disrobing act…an exhibition of sensual passion, which under the harrow circumstances, was merely disgusting” (New York Times 1906 p. 115). Nethersole is an important foil to the discussion of Terry’s success, because she is a perfect inversion of Terry’s adopted identities. While Terry was a fallen woman, but a publicly revered one, Nethersole was herself virtuous yet publically created the façade of a femme fatale as a business decision.

Indeed, as illustrated by Terry and Nethersole, it is apparent that the Victorian actress was able to navigate the strict confines of Victorian female identity in order to live in a “world apart”—a world of her own choosing. While ordinary Victorian women were confined to the binary of the Angel and the Devil, the leading actress maintained a quality of mystery that set her apart from the normal stereotypes of society. It is said of Terry that “[s]he was both Aphrodite, goddess of love and Boudicca the warrior queen: a thread of pagan gold weaving through the somber morality of the Victorian era” (Melville 9). Somehow, in all their fascinating liminality, Terry and Nethersole both managed to navigate the Victorian era’s polarized female identities and emerge as respected, even worshipped figures, though they did so by opposite means.
In my discussion of Terry and Nethersole, I shine a light on the performativity of Victorian culture at large, because the actress was able to perform her way out of social constructs. The actress was aware of the dual identities available to her—Angel and Devil—and navigated them seamlessly in a powerful display of deliberate performance. But, to complicate the matter, neither Terry nor Nethersole belonged solely to either stereotype. Their very liminality—by virtue of their ability to move back and forth between identities—was what made them so captivating and interesting to the public and what allowed them to live happily outside the confines of the norm. In this thesis I will investigate the phenomenon of Terry and Nethersole’s unexpected successes as a microcosm for demonstrating the complicated nature of Victorian gender performativity. Ultimately, I am working toward discussing a perplexing question raised by the study of performativity and liminality: how is it that cultural performance possesses the dual ability to both reinforce social norms and to protest against them? The fascinatingly liminal Victorian actress plays a starring role in both functions.

Performing cultural norms and protests

Apart from making up a fascinating cultural study, my look at the social performances of Terry and Nethersole spring from my conclusion that more work in examining the performative nature of gender and in the lives of Victorian actresses is vital to contributing to the field of theatrical and performance studies. The rapidly expanding discipline of performance studies—in connecting theatrical performance with everyday human performativity in a “spectrum” of acting—provides important insight into both gender studies and social norms. I am particularly interested in applying contemporary themes in performance and gender studies to Victorian cultural studies because such work has rarely been done, particularly in relation to Victorian
theatre. As Jane Moody explained in 1999, “nineteenth-century theatre is an area rich in opportunities for interdisciplinary study in the next century.” However, “It is also a subject crying out for new theoretical perspectives and a greater self-consciousness about the processes of historical enquiry” (Moody 112). It is this very self-consciousness, the deliberate performance of actresses in society that I am investigating. Indeed, as picked-over as the field of Victorian studies is, the study of Victorian theater in the context of social performance is a largely untapped resource in the twenty-first century.

In *In Performance: a Critical Introduction*, Marvin Carlson explains that “[t]he study of traditional ‘artistic’ performance such as theater… has taken on new dimensions and begun to explore newly observed relationships between these and other cultural and social activities” (6). The Victorian actress becomes a fascinating study in the parallels between performance on stage and performativity in life because she not only performed in a theater, but she lived in an era of strictly dictated social activities—behaviors that required specifically coded performances. As Schechner famously writes, “There are no clear boundaries separating… acting on stage from acting offstage…” (Shechner 171). The “performer,” of course, is the only person who experiences both of these forms of acting, and the Victorian actress—working in a profession carrying centuries’ old association with prostitution and living in an age demanding only virtue and modesty from her sex is a perfect study of the paradoxes and cross-overs of performativity.

The significant contribution of my application of performance theory to Victorian cultural studies, however, is discussing the self-consciousness with which many actresses “performed” both on stage and in society. Far from falling submissively into culturally dictated roles or performing them unconsciously, actresses stood outside society by the nature of the tropes and liminality inherent to their profession. Thus, they consciously and continually were
forced to decide which identities to perform, and when to perform them. Thus, these anomalies in Victorian society highlight the dual nature of social performance; it can both reinforce social norms (when one is seeking to fit in) and it can protest against them (when one is seeking to escape categorization). And, if actresses could perform both of these functions successfully, as Ellen Terry and Olga Nethersole did, they had the potential to enjoy a life of freedom that no Angel or Devil in the home or on the stage ever could.

Vital to my discussion of these two actresses’ remarkable identities is the idea of performativity as discussed in performance theory. Judith Butler helped introduce performativity and paved the way for the discipline of performance studies in her groundbreaking *Gender Trouble*. Since its publication in 1990, postmodern thought has largely adhered to the idea that gender is performative. To Butler, there are no unchanging, set rules to what determines sex or sexual identity, but merely socially-learned behaviors that individuals “perform” in society. Individuals are only gendered because they act in gendered ways. As Butler writes, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results (Butler 25). That is, we belong to our prescribed gender as we act out the culturally accepted behaviors of that gender on a daily basis. These behaviors are largely unconscious because they are so deeply ingrained in society.

Butler thus emphasizes that “sex” (traits that are biological and definite) and “gender” (traits that are performative and culturally conditioned) are both obsolete. To Butler, even biological, objective traits of “sex” are performative. But Butler is speaking primarily about unconscious performance—behaviors that we have no control over because we belong to society. We constantly reinforce society’s ideas of gender because in order to be accepted in society we must enact behaviors that belong to those ideas. Of course, Victorian actresses belonged to
society, and thus must have performed gendered and classed identities unconsciously. But because of their peculiar status as performer and living in an era with such strict societal guidelines of gender and behavior, they also self-consciously navigated the tropes and liminality of their profession and, inevitably, decided which identities to perform.

The result of Butler’s theory of performativity is the questioning of what lies at the very heart of feminist theory and the feminist movement itself—that is, is there any unified, tenable definition of what a woman is? Performance theory seeks to fill this cognitive gap, in looking at the various functions of social performance. Not only is performance unconscious and socially-conditioned, but it can be deliberate—what Richard Schechner calls “restored behavior.” “Most people, most of the time,” he writes, “know the difference between enacting a social role and playing a role onstage” (146). However, “Across this very wide spectrum of performing are varying degrees of self-consciousness and consciousness of the others with whom and for whom we play. The more self-conscious a person is, the more one constructs a behavior for those watching and/or listening, the more such behavior is ‘performing’” (146). Indeed, Schechner and other performance studies scholars look at restored behavior with an eye towards creating a strong distinction between a behavior being “done,” and something being “performed.” That is, once a behavior is done consciously it becomes a performance.

In keeping with this theory, I postulate that Victorian actresses constantly deliberately performed, even when they weren’t on stage, because the roles they had to choose from in society required very specific and, for them, conscious behaviors. More than the average woman, the actress was a professional performer, and thus consciously continued her trade, even off of the stage. As Carlson elucidates, “The difference between doing and performing…would seem to lie not in the frame of theatre versus real life but in an attitude—we may do actions unthinkingly,
but when we think about them, this brings in a consciousness that gives them the quality of a performance” (4). Living in a society with such strictly determined gender roles as the Victorian age, it is natural to assume that actresses, keenly aware of their precarious social position, deliberately acted out restored behavior.

This self-conscious liminality of the Victorian actress sheds light on some of the larger questions of contemporary gender studies and performance theory. “As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an ‘act,’” Butler writes, “open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism” (Butler 146-47). The study of the various identities and struggles of the actress serves as a theoretical microcosm for the female gender at large, as well as an important insight into these vital questions of performance theory. By looking at Terry (and her contemporaries), I investigate a life of self-reflexive performance, both on stage and off, that elucidates the surprisingly liminal position of Victorian gender stereotypes at large.

This liminality is best characterized in the dual nature of social performance; it is both capable of reinforcing social norms and of protesting against them. Butler claims that all humans mindlessly perform and reinforce culturally-conditioned behaviors to establish gender identity. This is the normative function of performance. But, in Schechner’s concept of “restored behavior,” the “living reactualization of socially symbolic systems,” individuals can also self-reflexively perform normative behaviors. On the flip-side, however, performance studies investigates performance as a “liminal process,” a “reflexive transgression of social structures. Marginal, on the edge, in the interstices of institutions and at their limits, liminal performances are capable of temporarily staging and subverting their normative functions” (McKenzie “Perform” 8). In other words, cultural performances, when they are enacted self-consciously in the way they are by actresses, have the potential to simultaneously reinforce norms and to
subvert them. In fact, according to Marvin Carlson in his *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, the field of performance studies itself arose out of a desire to protest against socially accepted wrongs. He states that “growing interest in the cultural dynamics embedded in the performance and theatrical representation itself was primarily stimulated by a materialist concern for exposing the power and oppression in society” (168). For the Victorian actress, one of the greatest societal oppressions placed upon her was her profession’s historical association with moral indecency.

In 1832, the Select Committee on Dramatic Literature made a strong pronouncement, reflecting the general opinion on the correlation between theaters and houses of ill repute:

> If there are any places in the world where indecency is openly and shamelessly exhibited, it is within the walls of the great monopolist houses, sacred to the holy worship of the ‘legitimate’ drama. It is there not only exhibited, but encouraged; not only encouraged, but defended, as a means of attraction far more potent than the charms of that fair incognita the ‘legitimate’ drama… Two-thirds of the house cannot if they would, escape the odour of [the Lord Chamberlain’s] fry of fornication, or avoid tumbling over the phocae that roll in and out of his Protean hall. (“Report” 41-2)

To much of the Victorian public, theatres were essentially brothels, and the actresses that worked in them had to decide whether to protest against the sexual associations of the profession or to embrace them. Most importantly to my research, this choice was a performative one. It highlights the fact that there was no escaping the sexual connotations of the acting profession, but it also demonstrates the self-conscious gender performativity that Butler discusses. In order to navigate the polar identities available to actress, she had to be incredibly self-aware. But, as Butler notes, the choices involved in constructing gender identity are not made once and
definitively. Indeed, “Identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability” (Butler 105). To Butler, gender norms are constantly in need of repetition and reinforcement and, as such, are a daily act of performance and recommitment to identity. The curiosity of Victorian actress is that she was keenly aware of her performances.

Many scholars, such as Deborah Pye and Mary Jean Corbett, have searched for a middle ground among the strict female identities of the late nineteenth-century; were any women viewed simply as ordinary, redeemable mortals? The authors argue that Victorian actresses became such women because they *performed* the role of a traditional female in society while simultaneously living autonomously and thus escaping the Victorian feminine pedestal (Corbett 107). As Pye puts it, “Victorian actresses portray themselves as ordinary, respectable women, but at the same time they are also concerned with establishing an image of themselves as skilled professionals who by their own efforts have earned the right to public acclaim and financial success” (Pye 73). As I discuss the first function of performativity—reinforcing social norms—it is important to keep in mind the fact that Victorian actresses did so with the express purpose of butting against the connotations of their profession. Fascinatingly, even in performing expected and accepted societal behavior, actresses were protesting against society.

Identities: Angels (and Devils) on the stage

Similar to the paradoxical nature of Terry’s and Nethersole’s fame, the late nineteenth century British stage was hopelessly confused. Queen Victoria’s reign was characterized by virtue, modesty, and Victorian idealism. Indeed, shortly before her death, Cardinal Gibbons noted that the “death of Queen Victoria will send a thrill of sorrow throughout the world, not
only because of the almost universal diffusion of the British Empire, but still more because of the domestic virtues of the woman whose long and eventful reign will be ever memorable in the annals of England and whose character will command the love of her subjects and admiration of the civilized world” (Rusk 442, emphasis added). But the Victorian theatre didn’t reinforce its sovereign’s established norms through domestic virtue, but by clinging to historical connotations of sexuality and indecency in the minds of many. That is, it still embodied everything Victoria herself would eschew. Author Lewis Carroll, though a devoted fan of Ellen Terry’s, reportedly refused to introduce a young girl to the actress without permission from the girl’s parents (Cohen 237). Clearly, to Carroll, Terry’s status of fallen woman trumped that of star status and, perhaps, was even increased by the historical implications of her profession.

However, other practitioners of the theater butted against established norms. George Bernard Shaw said of the theatre that, “behind the scenes, [it] has an emotional freemasonry of its own, certainly framer and arguably wholesomer than the stiffness of suburban society outside” (vii). Some actors, like Terry’s partner, Henry Irving, actively lobbied for social acceptance. In 1889, Queen Victoria invited Terry and Irving to perform theatrical scenes for her at Buckingham palace and, in 1895, she knighted Irving\(^1\), signaling a significant shift in the acting profession’s social legitimacy, until which the “social acceptance of the actor did not become quite unquestionable” (Bernard Shaw vii). But, if an actor and manager could be knighted by Victoria—the very paragon of Victorian decency— then there was obviously room in society for theatrical individuals to be viewed as decent.

\(^1\) Terry wasn’t made Dame until 1925 at the age of 78, three years before her death. This suggests that although the respectability of theatre was certainly on the rise, lines were still drawn by society as to the relative respectability of the actor and actress. The Victorian actress was still a woman, and thus less eligible than her male counterpart for recognition.
Furthermore, despite his decades-long attachment to Terry, biographers agree that Irving avoided a romantic affair with the actress for the very purpose of establishing himself and his theater as respectable. Some deeply romantic correspondence exist between the two actors, including a letter which Irving finishes, “You gave me a lovely letter to take away with me on Monday—My own dear wife as long as I live” (Ellen Terry Memorial Museum Archives). But if the couple were actually involved, they were very careful not to make their attachment public. As Edy, Ellen’s beloved daughter, relates, Irving loved her mother, but, “he loved himself and his calling as an actor, which were really inseparable, more” (Melville 105). And, to Irving, loving his calling meant establishing its respectability: “Irving couldn’t afford the notoriety of a divorce and, in striving to bring respectability to the theatre which was still regarded as an immoral occupation, he must have realized that an open affair with Ellen would have destroyed all his work” (Melville 106). However, much of the theatrical community still struggled between two identities; public opinion on the matter was in a state of growth and flux.

Was theatre London’s principle source of entertainment-- legitimate enough for the Queen herself to patronize-- or still the seedbed of all corruption and deviance in Victorian society, as it had been considered for centuries? At the center of this split identity was the actress, a figure both well-beloved in the public eye (in the case of Terry) and the literal embodiment of everything a Victorian woman shouldn’t be—loose, sexualized, and working (in the case of contemporaries like Olga Nethersole). The liminal nature of the actress, the fact that she simultaneously existed within and outside of society, meant that she had multiple identities to choose from. The most troublesome identity available to Terry and her contemporaries was, of course, that of the fallen woman. The image of the Victorian “fallen woman” haunts the era. The stark contrast between Coventry Pattmore’s infamous “Angel in the House,” the ideal, long-
suffering Victorian woman who “yokes/ Her heart to an icicle or whim,/ Whose each impatient word provokes/ Another, not from her, but him” (109) and the tainted woman-- whether or not by any fault of her own-- has inspired decades of fascination. It is a curiosity of the Victorian age that a woman’s virginity was “the property of her family, then of her husband, and if she had neither she was defenseless” (Basch 202).

This attitude, of course, was fought against by philosophers and moralists like Ryan, Mayhew, and Greg, who wrote that even though it was solely the female who was punished and cast out for indiscretion, “[t]he Divine law, however, equally condemns both sexes; …the heartless seducer is, however, received into society, while not only odium and disgrace, but disease, destitution, and misery, fall upon his innocent victim” (Ryan et al 171). Despite protests like these, society’s opinion on the matter was firmly intact into the late nineteenth century: if a woman was disgraced, she was beyond redemption.

Terry’s kind of fame and adoration was, as I have stated, an anomaly. The Victorian actress was in very real danger of being seen as a fallen woman merely by stepping onto the stage. As Dr. Michael Ryan said of actresses in 1839 in Prostitution in London, “The attitudes and personal exposure of these females are most disgusting to every really modest mind, and more suited to an improper house than to public exhibition….were the scenes and figures depicted in prints and drawings [instead of on the stage], and offered for sale, they would be considered outrages on public morals” (5). Indeed, in direct contrast to the Victorian ideal of the wife modestly abiding in the home, the actress placed herself on stage (usually in form-fitting costumes) for all to see; and she made money doing it. In many Victorian minds, actresses were nothing more than prostitutes.
Because of this ubiquitous actress-whore trope, as Tracy Davis puts it, the word “actress” remained scatologically synonymous with ‘scandal.’ But this was a perception that wasn’t invented by the prudish Victorian era; it was derived from centuries of collective associations—not necessarily from the behavior of any specific actresses. As discussed, the theatre was becoming increasingly more accepted in the late Victorian era. But in *Actresses and Whores*, Davis notes that even in the late nineteenth century, “[i]rrespective of changes in the socioeconomic/educational/moral background of recruits and in spite of the theatre’s increasingly sympathetic reception, the popular culture continued to ascribe immorality and sexual indiscretion to actresses” (296).

A prime example of this long-held bias is Ellen Terry’s first husband, celebrated painter George Frederick Watts. He wrote that in marrying the winsome seventeen-year-old as a much older man, he meant to save her “from the temptations and abominations of the stage…” (Watts Gallery Archives). Indeed, although critics of the time, like Clement Scott, described the child-bride Terry as the paragon of youthful innocence— “…a young girl of enchanting loveliness. She was the ideal of every Pre-Raphaelite painter…”—Watts viewed her future path as an actress, having been raised in a theatrical family, as one that could only end in ruin (Pemberton 78). Watts wrote to his confidant, Lady Constance Leslie: “I can hardly regret taking the poor child out of her present life and fitting her for a better…for you know the prejudice there is against the stage (I share it myself)” (Watts Gallery Archives).

Needless to say, Watts’ benevolent rescue mission didn’t result in a happy marriage. In the *Divorce Proceedings* of 1877, Watts’ attorney cited Terry’s theatrical upbringing as making her unfit for traditional Victorian wifedom. He said that
...although considerably older than his intended wife he admired her very much and hoped to influence, guide and cultivate a very artistic and peculiar nature and to remove an impulsive young girl from the dangers and temptations of the stage... [but] very soon after his marriage he found how great an error he had made. Linked to a most restless and impetuous nature accustomed from the very earliest childhood to the stage and forming her ideas of life from the exaggerated romance of sensational plays, from whose acquired habits a quiet life was intolerable and even impossible... (40)

To Watts and his attorney, Terry was forever unfit to successfully perform her role of Angel in the House by very virtue of the fact that she had been raised to be an actress.

But Watts’ deepest fears, influenced by mainstream Victorian views, were even more sinister. Anticipating Terry’s return to the stage, he prepared for the inevitable, predatory sexuality she would develop as an actress even in his divorce terms. Watts agreed to pay Terry 300 pounds a year “so long as she shall lead a chaste life,” but she had to vow not to “molest or disturb the said GF Watts in his person or manner of living...or seek or endeavor to compel the said G F Watts to cohabit with her or to compel any restitution of conjugal rights” (Divorce Proceedings). Given that the court viewed this request as perfectly reasonable, it appears that Watts’ perception of actresses as perilously sexual beings must have sprung from a knowledge that was “on the level of ‘common knowledge,’ or the folkloric” (Davis 296-7).

But the observant student of theatrical history may well ask “why?” In Watts’ defense, his association of actresses with prostitution was a connection that had persisted from the very foundations of Western civilization. Indeed, ancient Rome reinforced this connection, as evidenced by its laws dictating the treatment of actresses and prostitutes. For example, the
marriage of Justinian and Theodora in 525 C.E was between an aristocrat and a former actress, and thus prohibited by law. David Daube traces the law back to Augustus, the original founder of the Roman monarchy. The stated rule forbids marriage to *qua ipsa cuiusve pater materve artem ludicram facit fecerit*, “one who herself or whose father or mother practices or has practiced stagecraft” (Paul I) In fact, Theodora’s changing of her profession wouldn’t affect her situation at all; “Once an actress, always an actress” (Daube 381).

This legal evidence of misogyny in ancient Rome is merely a prologue in the history of the actress and whore association. From the very beginnings of western Christianity, woman was already firmly established as a deceitful provocateur. From the world’s first woman, Eve, the female half of society continued to be seen primarily as a temptation to be resisted in mainstream Christianity. As Tertullian, the “Father of Latin Christianity,” so blithely put it in the second century, “Woman, you are the gate to hell”. And, in the thirteenth century, Saint Albertus Magnus elaborated, explaining that

> What she [woman] cannot get, she seeks to obtain through lying and diabolical deceptions. And so, to put it briefly, one must be on one's guard with every woman, as if she were a poisonous snake and the horned devil... Thus in evil and perverse doings woman is cleverer, that is, slyer, than man. Her feelings drive woman toward every evil, just as reason impels man toward all good. (XV q. 11, qtd. By Ranke Heinemann 178)

As such, Western women who function in a traditional Christian paradigm have historically had to make an important performative decision: will they act out their role of virtuous and subservient woman, or seek for autonomy and thus be confined to the realm of the opposition—of sinfulness, deceit, and predatory sexuality? The actress is the perfect figure to
study in relation to this predicament, because in making herself a public spectacle, she already steps outside of traditional, virtuous womanhood and (somehow, ubiquitously) associates herself with a world linked by society to prostitution. Her performances, then, both in a literal and societally gendered sense, become a study in the different ways females adopt and discard the roles assigned to them.

Of course, the Victorian era was much kinder to females than the middle ages were, placing the socially acceptable ones on a pedestal in the home as “Angel,” rather than casting them out of the garden as seductress. The ideal Victorian woman happily confined herself to the domestic sphere and stood as a paragon of virtue. In her 1831 treatise, *Woman, in Her Social and Domestic Character*, Mrs. John Sanford explains of woman that “[n]ature has assigned her a subordinate place, as well as subordinate powers; and it is far better that she should feel this, and should not arrogate the superiority of the other sex” (113). However, a woman finds pleasure, even in her inferior state, in the home. “Domestic life is a woman’s province,” she writes, “and it is there that she is most usefully as well as most appropriately employed” (5). In her domestic paradise an ideal Victorian woman stands as the paragon of virtue: “Delicacy, indeed, is the point of honour in woman. Her purity of manner will ensure to her deference; and repress, more effectually than any other influence, impropriety of every kind” (6). Although the Victorian woman was seen as naturally inferior and subordinate to man, she had a duty to protect home and hearth with Christian values.

However, if impropriety did befall a woman and rendered her a fallen woman, all connotations of Western Christian misogyny instantly returned. Reflecting the preponderance of fallen women in works of drama and literature, an editor of *The Times* in 1858 reminds his readers of the deep, deliberate sinfulness of fallen women. The bulk of them, he says, “are not
Magdalens either in esse or posse, nor specimens of humanity in agony… They are not—the bulk of them—cowarding under gateways, nor preparing to throw themselves from the Waterloo bridge, but are comfortably practicing their trade [prostitution]…To attribute to them the sentimental delicacies of a heroine of romance would be equally preposterous” (Fisher 44). According to this editor, outside of her proper domestic sphere, the fallen woman is not worthy of the glamour plays and novels lend to her. She is deliberately choosing vice, and thus is not worthy of sympathy.

Actresses, then—fitting between long-held historical associations with prostitution and Christian views on seductresses—didn’t seem to stand much of a chance for holding a positive reputation in western society. Kristen Pullen observes in *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and in Society* that “the enduring tie between prostitution and performance, between actresses and whores, tells a great deal about Western cultural myths of women and sexuality” (2). Indeed, the fact that so many theatrical women in Western history (simply by choosing the acting profession) were reputed also to have been prostitutes emphasizes the patriarchal society’s firm restrictions on “female experience and expression”.

A link that some scholars propose in order to explain the continued bias against actresses through the late nineteenth century is their constant inclusion in Victorian erotica. Publications represented actresses as subjects of sexual fantasy so often that “acting was the most often particularized occupational type of women” (Davis 296). Of course, erotica of the time would hardly be considered as such now. In *The Days’ Doings*, an “inexpensive mid-Victorian erotic and scandalous magazine,” no actual naked bodies are ever depicted (Davis 299). Rather, indiscretion is hinted at, relying on the viewer’s own associations between the theater and immorality. For example, in the February 17, 1872 issue, policemen eagerly converse outside of
a well-lit building near the Old Vic theater, where the windows are covered in theater prints, promising more tantalizing materials of the same subject matter within. No words are printed, but the visual rhetoric is clear and relies on popular understanding of the connection between the theater and the shop’s wares.

With this seemingly unavoidable stereotype, it seems surprising that any truly chaste woman would enter the profession at all. If she was inevitably destined to be seen as a prostitute regardless of her actual behavior—as Watts’ fear of Terry confirms—why would an actress ever aspire to act? This is exactly the question the Victorian man asked.

Olga Nethersole and performing identities

Indeed, the question was often asked of Olga Nethersole, an English-born actress who performed most successfully in the United States. As a strong foil to Ellen Terry, Nethersole made a career of portraying the actress/whore trope, especially with her infamous “Nethersole kiss,” with which she would scandalously lock lips with her scene partner for minutes on end. According to Hamilton Mason, playing the title role in Carmen to sold-out houses during a two week run “began to establish her in the bad graces of the critics, who felt that she was degrading herself and her art to appear in the part of such a trollop” (22). Indeed, as a critic reflected in 1907, her “portrayals left little to the imagination. Her powerful and passionate displays of emotional virtuosity were particularly suited to the classic mid-nineteenth-century Fallen Women who went from chastely pure to sexually sinful (and permutations of that role) thereby enabling her to run through a wide range of emotions” (March 1907). Indeed the “emotional actress,” as she was termed, capitalized on Fallen Woman roles, and in doing so filled theater after theater.
However, Nethersole’s theatrical performances of Fallen Women eventually became confused with those of her personal life when she was arrested in 1900. While portraying her most infamous Fallen Woman role, that of Sapho, at the Wallack’s Theatre in New York, Nethersole was taken to court to face a charge of lewd behavior. In the indictment, she was accused of “disturbance of the peace, being a public nuisance, giving an immoral entertainment, and being improperly dressed” (New York Dramatic Mirror, June 9, 13). However, Nethersole’s performances had scandalized her critics enough that she wasn’t just being accused of playing a fallen woman, but of being one.

The Reverend Thomas Chalmers Easton, one of the many clergymen who railed against Nethersole’s Sapho and helped to stir the public outrage that spurred her arrest, claimed that Nethersole herself was a “lewd woman” and an adulteress in real life. He expressed the clear sentiment that “[t]here is not a clean theatre on earth. Every one of them is a pile of dirt” (New York Dramatic Mirror, May 5, 14). Nethersole, in turn, fought and won a twenty thousand dollar slander suit against him. However, in the public eye, the lines between the actress’s character and the characters she played were blurry.

The World newspaper reported on the indictment on February 22, 1900, saying that “[t]he basis for the complaint was an affidavit submitted by Robert Mackay, reporter for The World, who revealed a basic confusion between the character in the play and the actress's own character” (1). Indeed, Nethersole was accused of “[i]ndecent postures, indecent suggestive language against good morals and indecent conduct . . . the portrayal of the life of a lewd and dissipated woman” in court (1). Apparently, because the actress portrayed a fallen woman on stage, there were reasonable grounds for her to be arrested as one.
Thus, the identity of the actress was lost in a constantly self-justifying cycle of stigmatization. As the theater’s constant inclusion in pornography and Nethersole’s hasty arrest display, the male theatre-goer viewed the actress as the pervasive image of sexuality that society held her to be, and her “seeming willingness to participate in the debasement (i.e. continuing to perform) served to justify his low opinion of actresses, instigate repeated imaginary defilements, and eroticize all aspects of their realm” (Davis 309). Thus the theatre, and the actress who performed there, were firmly established as the paragon of male sexual fantasy.

But Olga Nethersole was no victim of the male gaze, unexpectedly slandered in the crossfire of stereotypes. She calmly defended her heroine in Sapho, stating her surprise that any rational person would confuse an immoral act on stage with an immoral message in a play. She explained: “I would not call Sapho an immoral woman. I would call her an unmoral woman. You would not condemn a heathen for not believing in God, so you could not condemn a woman who has never known what morality is for not being moral. It is not possible. She does not know about it. The distinction does not exist for her” (“A Discussion of Stage Morals…” 1-2).

In fact, Nethersole purposefully made her career by playing fallen women. Indeed, when Nethersole attempted to play other kinds of parts, people scoffed. In the actress’s own words: “They thought that any part in which I was at my best must have, as Mr. Pinero expressed it 'a bit of the devil in it” (Nethersole 2). And these types of parts, despite arrests and angry clergymen—or perhaps because of them—drew crowds and gave Nethersole enormous success, especially in America, where the British actress was viewed as somewhat exotic. As one commentator in the New York Daily Mirror energetically proclaimed, “If any American actress should try to do the things Miss Nethersole does on the stage she would fill the theatre. But no American actress
would have the nerve to do so. For which, thank heaven, please arise and join me in singing the ‘Star Spangled Banner’” (Hall).

This kind of humorous patriotism is exactly what Nethersole capitalized on. In the puritanical nation of America, she played countless Fallen Woman roles, to enormous financial success. But far from ostracizing her as evil, the public craved scandal and notoriety. Nethersole’s success thus highlights the deep chasm between the roles Victorians were expected to perform in society, even if they did so unconsciously, and the actual sensibilities upon which they acted. Nethersole, far from moving along with the unconscious majority, knew exactly how to perform the role of fallen woman and femme fatale in order to draw her crowds. And when she embarked on her first return tour to her native England she wrote to Jack London, “I will make heaps and heaps of money for you, that I am sure” (Letter to Jack London).

Nethersole’s capitalization on the fallen woman role, however, wasn’t solely a smart business decision. The actress truly empathized with the characters she played, understanding the very real plight of fallen women in Victorian society. Nethersole’s closest associates would note that the actress experienced real trauma for hours after her most emotional performances— the pain, guilt, and destitution of a fallen woman was simply overwhelming. Her intimate friend Amy Leslie noted,

Long after Miss Nethersole has finished her theatrical performance of a vividly emotional role she lies under the nervous wear and excitement of her acting. Tears bedew her ivory cheeks and mat her long, soft lashes, and her bosom heaves and breath comes fast and fiery, and the physical emancipation from this dramatic hysteria does not come to the actress for minutes and sometimes hours.” (Leslie 300)
But Nethersole felt that the trauma of portraying a fallen woman was worth the art she was able to create. She said, “I think it is always so with art. It is chastened and broadened by the true and deep feeling which suffering engenders” (Nethersole 2). However, despite her empathy for her characters, Nethersole’s fallenness (unlike Ellen Terry’s) was restricted to the stage. In fact, “In her personal life, Nethersole was anything but the scandalous woman she depicted on the stage. A true daughter of the Victorian era, she was a no nonsense woman who believed in the puritan ethic of hard work, healthful living and philanthropy” (Reilly 19).

In fact, the actress lived an unremarkable private life as far away as possible from prostitution. She kept a quiet house in rural Hampstead and a farm in Cornwall. She lived with her friend Kathleen Nora Madge Field, and, “[w]hen not pursuing the limelight she lived the life of a recluse, bicycling, motoring, taking long walks in the country and raising several pampered dogs...” (Reilly 7). Indeed, after the Sapho scandal, Nethersole lived her life essentially free of notoriety, and, most notably, without romantic attachment. No sense of homosexual scandal is hinted at in biographies of the actress, and, in a segment entitled “Three Homes and No Husband,” the Green Book Album notes,

When a woman has physical attractions, brilliant ability, fame, and fortune, she can marry if she wants to, and if she doesn’t, it is a sign that she prefers to be a bachelor girl. A prominent member of this order of independent young women is Miss Olga Nethersole, and if ever any one of the feminine gender could canter along gracefully in single harness, this very accomplished player is the shining example. Some way it wouldn’t seem right to think of Olga Nethersole with a husband; he would seem such a superfluity! (371-72)
With a very public scandal under her belt and a reputation as a femme fatale, one would expect Nethersole, as Terry did, to marry for respectability. And yet, it appears that Nethersole deliberately performed the part of the fallen woman consistently and well, even to the point of getting arrested for it. Though she well knew the risk of performing the identity of fallen woman, she continued to do so to keep her career going.

In fact, as a shrewd business woman, Nethersole also felt that her first priority was to portray truth on the stage. “Truth is the keynote of my work,” she said. “If anything I do has any merit, I owe it to a constant striving after truth—after the real thing” (“A Few Words” 204). Nethersole’s commitment to “truth” thus motivated her to consistently fly in the face of public norm and expectation. Her actions on stage consistently shocked the “puritanically inclined” when she enacted such naturalistic behaviors as “blowing her nose, smearing her makeup, smoking a cigarette, exposing her bare feet, turning her back to the audience, dropping her voice to a whisper and crawling off the stage on all fours” (Coad 293).

Indeed, both Nethersole and Terry appeared in many ways—perhaps in a deliberate performance—to be unperturbed by social norms. As Nethersole boldly continued to play fallen woman roles after her arrest, silently defying the absurdity of her accusers’ slander, Ellen Terry never publicly contradicted the sexual implications of Watts’ *Divorce Proceedings* because she saw them as “so manifestly absurd” (Melville 40). Terry felt that she had nothing to prove or defend, and that her reputation wouldn’t suffer because of it. Somehow, she was beyond censure in her status as star actress. Thus, she listened to Watts’ fearful accusations in dignified silence. But how to reconcile these two actresses’ bold candor and disregard for social norms with the fearsome actress/whore trope we find so firmly in place in Victorian society? As aforementioned, the association was firmly ingrained, as evidenced by Watts’ fear of Terry and
America’s fascinated fear of Nethersole. Did the actresses simply not care how they were viewed, and were fortunate enough to escape social ostracism and live happy lives and wildly successful careers?

The liminality of the performing Angel: norms and protests

In “The State of the Abyss: Nineteenth Century Performance and Theatre…” Jane Moody claims that the power and autonomy actresses like Terry and Nethersole enjoyed was contingent on the very fact that men associated them as sexual objects. She writes, “The theatre was a battleground for competing ideologies of gender. Actresses felt intoxicated by the power they could exert over men as performers; the masculine response to the actress’ relative independence and agency, however, was to circumscribe and nullify its threat by interpreting female performers in terms of prostitution, madness and disease” (Moody 118).

According to Moody, actresses did enjoy power and autonomy, but—whatever the relative legitimacy of their personal lives—their autonomous power, unavailable to ordinary women, came from their perceived sexuality. And, by virtue of such, the actress was still reinforcing normative behaviors and perceptions of the actress-as-whore. In this line of thinking, actresses deliberately used the very limitations of the actress/whore stigma in order to gain and maintain socioeconomic power virtually unavailable to women in their era. Indeed, to Nethersole, sexuality was a role women played in order to get the autonomy denied them by male-dominated society. Not only were all women actresses, but good actresses were the most empowered women.

It is interesting to note, however, that if women thus relied solely on their sexuality for power, they still firmly placed themselves in the capacities dictated for them by male fantasies—
in clear view of the “male gaze.” Any real-world power they gained from their sensual “performances” still stemmed from their adherence to societal expectations for women. In the words of Kirsten Pullen, “when actresses and prostitutes perform a version of femininity for their audiences and clients, they are citing established and historicized behaviors. The historical background of these behaviors insures that they will be read as specifically female and sexual” (8). Thus, many actresses like Ellen Terry, contrary to the tradition of sex symbols like Olga Nethersole, sought to distance themselves from the prostitute stigma, focusing instead on their “incipient professionalization” (Pullen 3). While some actresses heartily embraced the protest function of performance, others desperately sought the normative.

Truly, the actress was more than a mere subject for erotica and fantasy. In fact, because she didn’t fit neatly into the role of “Angel in the Home” or that of fallen woman, she flourished outside of both identities. Charles Read, Terry’s manager, summed up the public’s fascination with the mysteriously uncategorizable actress:

Ellen Terry is an enigma. Her eyes are pale, her nose rather long, her mouth nothing particular. Complexion a delicate brick dust, her hair rather like tow. Yet somehow she is beautiful. Her expression kills any pretty face you see beside her. Her figure is lean and bony, her hand masculine in size and form. Yet she is a pattern of fawn-like grace. Whether in movement or repose, grace pervades the hussy. In character impulsive, intelligent, weak, hysterical—in short all that is abominable and charming in woman…I see through and through her. Yet she pleases me all the same. Little duck! (Read 293-4)

Read captures perfectly the strange phenomenon of Terry’s success; he refers to her as a “hussy,” and yet simultaneously describes her as a fascinating creature to be revered and to stand in awe
of. Perhaps the secret to Terry’s success was to be fascinating enough that the public wanted to see her as respectable. Or, at least, legitimate enough to be celebrated.

To further complicate the nature of actresses’ identities, Terry wasn’t—according to all Victorian sensibilities—legitimate. While Nethersole merely played one on stage, Ellen Terry actually was a fallen woman. Still married to G. F. Watts (the divorce proceedings didn’t take place until twelve years after the couple’s separation), Terry moved to the country with her lover, architect Edward Godwin, and bore him two children. The couple never married. Fascinatingly enough, Terry appeared to perform this socially unacceptable behavior deliberately and fearlessly. In her memoire, Terry explains candidly that, against all expectations of society, she ran away with Godwin because she believed, “I have the simplest faith that absolute devotion to another human being means the greatest happiness. That happiness is now mine” (Terry 66). Fully aware of her status of fallen woman, Terry followed her heart simply because it would make her happy.

But, in an even more astonishing turn of events, when Terry decided she couldn’t live with Godwin any longer, she left her lover and returned to the stage almost effortlessly. As an unmarried woman with two illegitimate children, Terry’s family wouldn’t accept her—her children never met their cousins or grandparents—but the public welcomed her back with cheers. Because Terry was an actress, it seemed she could perform any variety of societal roles and still be accepted in them; she was a fallen woman to her family, but an Angel on the Stage to her fans. Belonging in her “world apart,” in her liminal, untouchable state as superstar actress, Terry’s son, Edward Gordon Craig, claimed, “She played but one part—herself. And when not herself, she couldn’t play it” (Craig 10). Craig seems to be making a claim for Terry’s consistency and lack of guile, her complete performance of only one role—herself. Ironically,
Craig makes this claim in his book, *Ellen Terry and Her Secret Self*, the title of which suggests that the actress had at least two identities—her public and private selves.

Whatever the true nature of Terry’s diverse identities, however, it is clear that she used them to her advantage to miraculously be seen as not only legitimate, but as worthy of worship in the public eye. George Bernard Shaw firmly believed that “every male theatregoer of the last quarter of the century was in love with her” (Melville 141). But Terry wasn’t simply a symbol for sexual fantasy, as Davis might purport. In fact, the actress, despite her sordid history, enjoyed enormous success as a perceived “good girl.” Unlike Nethersole, who focused on Fallen Woman roles, Terry built her career around playing acceptable Shakespearean heroines. The fascinating success of Terry, a bona fide Fallen Woman, speaks to the complicated performativity of Victorian culture. Terry can’t possibly be categorized as a either a clear-cut Victorian ideal or as a whore; but, because she was an actress, she was both and neither.

Contrary to Jane Moody’s idea, however, that actresses perceived personal autonomy while merely playing out the roles society’s expected of them, I argue that stars like Ellen Terry and Olga Nethersole, though they did so by opposite means, *deliberately* performed multiple roles in order to enjoy the autonomy they craved—one unavailable to the majority of Victorian women. Terry even signed letters by countless names—ET, Ellen, Eleanora, Nell, Poor Nell, Nelly, Nellen, or whatever stage part she was playing at the time. This was not a woman who viewed herself as easily categorized.

It is important to note, however, that Terry and her contemporaries didn’t gain legitimacy on their own. After all, Queen Victoria, the epitome of nineteenth century virtue, was an enthusiastic patron of the playhouse. Moody writes that
The plays seen by Victoria, as Princess and then as Queen, neatly sum up the heterogeneous character of Victorian performance...From the viewpoint of the 1780s (a favoured, respectable view for many historians of the Victorian theatre), the preceding half century or so can be safely represented as an era of dramatic vulgarity and popular sensation over which dramatic realism—and hence modernism—finally triumphed” (Moody 113).

Indeed, although the theater suffered from longtime stigmatization as houses of ill repute, times were certainly changing. Even in Victoria’s sequestered days after Albert’s death, she invited Irving and Terry multiple times to perform privately for her in her various palaces and houses.

And just as the theatre was in a liminal state of change, the actress who belonged to the theater was a liminal being, with multiple parts to perform. In an interesting display of social performativity, Ellen Terry boldly lived the life of a disgraced woman. But she did so, perhaps, for classically Victorian feminine ends. Indeed, even in accepting the identity of a Fallen Woman in moving in with Godwin, Terry also attempted to please him by exhibiting the behaviors of the Angel in the House. Laurence Irving (grandson of Henry) claimed that Ellen lived illicitly with Godwin because she was “longing for the fulfillment of her womanhood in a domestic life,” which she couldn’t do in her failed marriage to painter George Frederick Watts (Irving 147). It is ironic, but speaks to the expectations of the time that friends would assign traditional womanly motives to Terry even as she deliberately disgraced herself. Those who remembered her seemed to fit her into respectable molds, even in her times of social protest.

Friend and writer Graham Robertson defined Terry’s period of “living in sin” as precisely what made her such a beloved and accessible actress. He said, “I think it is because at the most critical and receptive age of 19, when most young players are working up towards their first
success and living wholly in the world behind the footlights, she left the stage and gave what would be considered her best years to a real life, away in the country, far from theatres and all concerning them” (Robertson 139-140). Indeed, Robertson attributed Terry’s success as an actress to the fact that, though she was protesting societal norms by living with a lover, she was living the proper life of a woman—a life in the home.

Despite her periods of domesticity, however, Terry was no Angel in her home with Godwin. Her beloved son, Teddy, said that “the blessed lady, my mother, no more knew how to bring up a boy than she knew how to swim” (Terry 192). Marguerite Steen, biographer and friend of the Terry family, noted that the actress “cooked abominable meals for her lover, invariably forgetting some essential ingredient, or letting the dish burn while she petted the animals, or wandered along the hedgerows, gathering autumn leaves and berries, which she was idly arranging while Godwin craved his supper” (Steen 123).

Terry was, however, acting out the part of Angel, whether she did so successfully or not. It speaks to the complicated nature of the actress that, even when she was deliberately living so far outside of societal expectations, she was still trying to fit within them by being a proper “housewife” to her lover. It is important to note, though, that Terry acted out socially-dictated behaviors self-consciously. She was keenly aware that in running away with Godwin she was flouting social norms. But in order to please him, even in their unusual situation, she acted out the role of a Victorian woman. As Terry wrote to her son, Ted, in 1888: “Remember, dear, it’s your duty to please them, not the Masters’ duty to please you!” (Melville 141).

Terry’s fans, too, wanted to squeeze her into their ideals of gentle Victorian womanhood. Critics described her with phrases like “picturesque, tender, and womanly throughout,” and “wonderful charm” (Melville 100). As unconventional as the actress was, she both sought and
was attributed conventional womanly traits in order to be successful. Indeed, although already enjoying a successful career, Terry sought social legitimacy through her marriage to actor Charles Kelly Wardell shortly after her divorce from Watts and separation from Godwin. The day after the wedding, Terry printed calling cards for “Mrs. Wardell,” and went to seek audience with her estranged family.

Even in her most unwomanly roles, Terry lent a touch of the ideal Victorian female. As Lady Macbeth in 1888, perhaps her most celebrated role, Terry strove to interpret the role in a similar fashion to the celebrated eighteenth century actress, Sara Siddons: “fair, feminine, perhaps even fragile” (Melville 143-4). Indeed, *Truth Magazine* said that Terry gave “an aesthetic Burne-Jonesy, Grosvenor Gallery version of Lady Macbeth, who roars as gently as any sucking dove” (Irving 504). Describing Terry in Pre-Raphaelite terms, she is portrayed as a dreamy, idealized Victorian woman—not a manly murderess.

Although Lady Macbeth is so often characterized as a “manly” woman, by nature of seeking to “unsex” herself and be bold enough to commit murder, Terry strove to present her more noticeably in accordance with the Victorian idea of woman. In fact, the actress argued that her character was “no monster,” but “a womanly woman…a woman in everything… her strength is all nervous force; her ambition is all for her husband. She has been the ‘dearest partner’ of all Macbeth’s thoughts and actions; she must needs by the partner of his crime” (Ellen Terry Memorial Museum Archives). In fact, in the margins of her script, Terry noted that the murderess “dies of remorse,” and notes that “I never yet heard of a murderer dying of remorse”—suggesting that there’s more, or, perhaps, less to Lady Macbeth than a traditionally cold-blooded killer.
But, as is always the case with Terry, neither she nor her characterization of Lady Macbeth *simply* fit into Victorian norms. The actress wrote to her daughter Edy of the role, “Some people hate me in it; some, Henry among them, think it my best part, and the critics differ, and discuss it hotly, which in itself is my best success of all! …It’s precious hard work for I by no means make her a ‘gentle, lovable woman’ as some of ‘em say. That’s all pickles. She was nothing of the sort, although she was not a fiend, and did love her husband” (Terry 234). As is characteristic with Terry, even when she was subscribing to social norms—presenting a faithfully devoted wife as her heroine—she was also protesting against them. Terry wanted Lady Macbeth to be *complicated*, a realistic woman that was as liminal as she was; her character possessed character traits that both the best and worst of women could offer.

Even Olga Nethersole toyed with Victorian norms in her productions. When the characteristically femme fatale actress took *Jane Eyre* from America and presented it in London, she changed the ending to present her Victorian audience with a more clearly moral message. Rather than finishing with the traditional ending of Rochester’s mad wife dying, enabling his happy marriage to Jane (Nethersole), in the London premiere the wife remained alive, forcing Rochester as a “bigamist-husband” to abandon Jane to escape the law, and leaving Jane “wretched and heartbroken” (*New York Times* 13). This deliberate alteration of a popular Victorian gothic romance shows the lengths to which Nethersole would go to reinforce expected societal norms. Rochester sinned. By escaping his sin he left Jane properly disgraced by the scandal. Even the deliberate femme fatale, Nethersole, performed reinforced societal norms when she thought it would be good for business.

However, normativity apparently wasn’t what the public craved. Nethersole “became excited at the prospect of doing more plays that conveyed a strong message of morality,” but
“none of them worked out commercially or artistically” (Reilly 161-62). Even William Winter, a harsh critic who characterized Nethersole’s trademark roles as “coarse” and “animal,” preferred her sensuality to attempts at portraying “maternal feeling” (Winter 320). Actresses shouldn’t be playing nurturing mothers, Winter felt, because actresses were no Angels in the House. In fact, for the most part, the public adored Nethersole’s portrayals of vice. In 1888, Nethersole received her “big break,” naturally by playing a seduced and fallen woman, Ruth Medway in The Union Jack. Even in this role, however, critics praised her in terms of typical Victorian ideals. The Theatre noted that Nethersole confessed her sins “with exquisite modesty,” (101), and The Illustrated London News praised her “great earnestness, simplicity and charm” (116).

The phenomenon of Nethersole’s fallen woman roles being accepted and even celebrated by the public is explained insightfully by Jon McKenzie’s theoretical concept of the “liminal-norm”. McKenzie states that the liminal-norm operates “in any situation where the valorization of liminal transgression or resistance itself becomes normative—at which point theorization of such a norm may become subversive” (McKenzie 27). That is, though Nethersole’s early performances earned her notoriety and even arrest, the public was so fascinated by her flouting of social custom, that her flouting eventually became the new norm. Eventually, it was accepted and invited.

Perfectly illustrating this phenomenon is the evolution of public reception to Nethersole’s infamous “kiss.” Early on, critics were vocal over the scandal of the actress’s tendency to kiss passionately for extended periods of time on stage, earning the proper nickname of “The Nethersole kiss.” Even Lewis Strang, a nineteenth-century biographer of actresses, was shocked by Nethersole’s three minute kiss in Carmen, explaining, “I should be pleased to omit any reference to Carmen but the notoriety of the Nethersole kiss will hardly permit that. . . .
Nethersole's acting was a study in lasciviousness, marvellously vivid and marvellously true to life. Indeed, therein was the chief cause for censure” (Strang 229). But so much hype surrounded the kiss and Nethersole’s naturalistic acting on stage, that audiences were disappointed by the time they actually saw her perform them. Indeed, even after *Sapho*, the performance that earned Nethersole’s arrest, a theatergoer explained to *The World*, “I came prepared to hear much that was risque and was agreeably disappointed” (3).

According to McKenzie, it is the nature of liminal performances that protest against established norms to eventually lose their novelty and become, in turn, norms themselves. In 1929, not long after Nethersole and Terry’s respective reigns ended, Charles Burnham noted in "Stage Indecency Then and Now: A Play that Made Our Daddies Blush Could be Read in Sunday-School Today” that the explosive public reaction to Sappho’s “stage vilenes” was caused by a run-of-the-mill script which, indeed, “could be read in Sunday-school today” (16).

In fact, for the majority of her career, Nethersole enjoyed the normative life of a respectable Victorian woman in many ways, even if she chose to perform fallen woman roles on stage. Her fallenness—her protesting against societal norms—was merely a role she played and, for that matter, a role she played to the delight of the very public she initially infuriated. As Michael Booth explains in *Prefaces to English Nineteenth Century Theatre*, “Nethersole's public portrayals of femmes fatale and leaders of fashion did not detract from her private image in England as a respected, prestigious member of society, at home in a world of royal garden parties, society functions, costume balls and philanthropic fund-raising schemes” (33). In fact, femme fatale Nethersole even shared the stage with good-girl Terry in a fundraising performance in London in 1894; it is ironic to note, of course, that the two women were opposites—one lived a spotless life off stage and built an onstage career around sexuality, and the other lived the life
of a fallen woman, but won the hearts of the public as an ideal Victorian ingénue. Either way, the liminal norm was in play.

An additional example of the liminal norm is Sarah Bernhardt, the revered French actress whom Terry met on many occasions. In fact, the *Saturday Review* commented in 1879 that Terry was to the English stage what Bernhardt was to the French stage (Pemberton 289). And similarly to Terry, Bernhardt chose her identities to perform, as evidenced by the fact that she entitled her memoirs “Ma Double Vie,” or “My Double Life.” Bernhardt was a child of illegitimate birth and bore an illegitimate son herself in 1864, “a catastrophic event if judged by prevailing standards of bourgeois morality,” and yet Bernhardt still enjoyed fame and reverence that set the standard for star status (Bernhardt viii). Furthermore, Bernhardt contracted many affairs with fellow actors, as well as statesmen, scholars, and, according to gossip, even royalty. Yet she wrote in her memoirs, “I wish to set aside…everything that directly touches intimacy in my life. There is a family ‘I’ that lives another life and whose sensations, joys, and sorrows are aroused and extinguished for a very small group of hearts” (viii).

The fascinating identities that these women adopted, and the ease with which they moved between their respective performative roles, points to the fact that the Victorian actress had many more avenues open to her than the ordinary Victorian woman did. In fact, it is easy to make the assumption that the actress was, indeed, the first “New Woman” as the Victorian era transitioned into the Edwardian. Because of the actresses’ liminality, their inability to fit into the mold of any specific Victorian identity, they were thus able to consciously perform whatever identity suited them best. And, in doing so, they overcame the unconscious performances of society and created their own identities.
Ellen Terry’s power as a woman in her own right—choosing deliberately to be seen as a Victorian Angel or to protest norms when it suited her—is perfectly demonstrated in her children’s perception of the word “woman”. As the story is told by Terry’s children, her daughter, Edith, once told her son, Teddy, to not be afraid of the dark with the emphatic injunction to “be a woman!” Obviously, due to Terry’s example, even the children nearest her saw that woman was neither a passive, submissive Victorian ideal, nor a passive and ostracized fallen creature. Rather, for actresses like Ellen Terry, being a woman meant being something altogether uncategorizable and remarkably strong; an actress was a woman who deliberately performed whatever identity would enable her to most fully live the life of her own choosing.
Works Cited


*The British Weekly*. 10 February 1888.


Paul I ad legem Juliam et Papiam, D 23.2.44


Davis, Tracy C. "The Actress in Victorian Pornography." Theatre Journal 41.3,

*Divorce Proceedings*. High Court of Justice, Probate, Divorce and Admiralty Division. 13 Mar 1877.


March 1907 clipping, Robinson Locke Collection, 362-363.


Nethersole, Olga. *Mirror*. April 17, 1897.

*New York Dramatic Mirror*, May 5, 1900.

*New York Dramatic Mirror*. June 9, 1900.


Tertullian. *De Cultu Feminarum*. I.I.

*The Theatre*. April 1, 1889.


*The World*. February 22, 1900.