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Picturing Nineteenth-Century Female Theatre Managers: the Iconology of Eliza Vestris and Sara Lane

Lucia Elizabeth Vestris (1797–1856) and Sara Lane (1822–99) were two pioneering women in nineteenth-century theatre history. Both were accomplished singers who made their names initially in comic and breeches roles and, during periods when theatrical management was almost exclusively confined to men, both ran successful theatre companies in London. Despite these parallels in their professional activities, there are substantial disparities in the scrutiny to which their personal lives were subjected and in how their contemporaries and posterity have memorialized them. In this article, Janice Norwood examines a range of portraits and cartoons of the two women, revealing how the images created and reflected the women's public identities, as well as recording changes in aesthetic practice and social attitudes. She argues that the women's iconology was fundamentally shaped by the contemporary discourse of gender difference. Janice Norwood is Senior Lecturer in English Literature, Drama, and Theatre Studies at the University of Hertfordshire. She has published on various aspects of nineteenth-century theatre history and edited a volume on Vestris for the *Lives of Shakespearian Actors* series (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011).

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NOT FAR APART in London's Kensal Green Cemetery are the burial places of two pioneering figures in nineteenth-century theatre history. The headstone marking Eliza Vestris's resting place has gone, and her grave is now only identifiable because it abuts that of her second husband (Charles Mathews Junior). The timeworn, urn-topped pedestal dedicated to Sara Lane and her spouse still stands. The condition of the memorials serves as a reminder of the transient nature of celebrity and how public identity is contingent on social factors.

In this article I explore the role of iconology in creating and maintaining the two women's public images. Examination of how Vestris and Lane were presented in a range of portraits and cartoons not only reflects differences in the women's individual characters and experiences, but also has a more general significance in revealing how such images were in turn shaped by nineteenth-century attitudes towards women in the

theatre and in society. My analysis focuses on the significance of gender difference, in the light of Linda Nochlin's assertion that

representations of women in art are founded upon and serve to reproduce indisputably accepted assumptions held by society in general, artists in particular, and some artists more than others, about men's power over, superiority to, difference from, and necessary control of women, assumptions which are manifested in the visual structures as well as the thematic choices of the pictures in question.¹

Such assumptions are frequently unacknowledged and may be further complicated by subconscious attitudes towards class. Norman Bryson's semiological approach to painting is also drawn on. For Bryson, 'painting is bathed in the same circulation of signs which permeates or ventilates the rest of the social structure', and thus is both generated by and forms part of the contemporary discourse.² This theoretical approach is applied to the portraits of Vestris and Lane, interpreting

them as sign vehicles conveying socially constructed codes. Central to the discussion is a focus on the dynamic between the women and the intended recipients of these signs, and an exploration of the degree to which the women had agency over their public representation.

It is useful to recount briefly what the women have in common and thus why they make an informative comparison. Both made their debuts as singers and subsequently became known for their breeches and comic roles, and, during periods when theatrical management was almost exclusively confined to men, both ran successful companies in London, Vestris at the fashionable Olympic in Covent Garden and the Lyceum, and Lane at the Britannia in the East End. Further, both continued to perform on stage themselves during their managerial years. They fall into the category of celebrity defined by Chris Rojek as 'achieved' – that is their status, at least initially, is due to accomplishment in their chosen field.³

Yet, for the actress, there is a long history of equating a rise to prominence with sexual availability. Kimberly Crouch's assertion that eighteenth-century actresses could present themselves either as prostitutes or as aristocratic women has been contested by Laura J. Rosenthal, who claims that the greatly expanded range of performance and print entertainments available in the urban cultural market widened the options, with 'theatre offer[ing] a third possibility of glamorous, independent woman with a mixed sexual reputation'.⁴ In the nineteenth century, the iconology of Vestris and Lane demonstrates this multiplicity, and the pairing of these particular women is presented here as illustrative of the diverse and changing nature of images of the female theatre professional rather than as the embodiment of a polarized and antithetical binary.

Vestris as a Public Figure

Lucia Elizabeth Vestris, née Bartolozzi (1797–1856) undertook her first professional engagement in 1815 singing opera at the King's Theatre in London. Her career took off in

1819, when she played the cross-dressed title role in William Moncrieff's burlesque opera *Giovanni in London* at Drury Lane. The production was a commercial success, but reaction to Vestris's performance was polarized. Typical of those who were outraged was a reviewer for the *Theatrical Inquisitor*, who censured Vestris for agreeing to play the role of the libertine, declaring it 'a part which no female should assume till she has discarded every delicate scruple by which her mind or her person can be distinguished'.⁵

In contrast, the diary of Henry Crabbe Robinson, who attended the performance on 13 April 1822, counteracts the suggestion of provocative licentiousness:

Mrs Vestris is a fascinating creature and renders the Don as entertainingly as possible and at the same time there is an air of irony and mere wanton and assumed wickedness which renders the piece harmless enough.⁶

The ballyhoo surrounding the production and the sexual ambivalence of Vestris's portrayal, which was the first of many breeches parts, served to fuel intense speculation about her private life, particularly since she was known to be an abandoned wife.⁷

Interest in Vestris fuelled the sale of images of the actress. Numerous portraits of her in male roles such as Giovanni, Don Felix, and Apollo appeared as prints, in penny-plain/tuppence-coloured toy theatres, and in journals. Christopher Balme suggests that all theatre artwork can be analyzed with regard to the 'referential dilemma', by which the historian should ask: 'Do such pictures index a "theatrical reality", an actual performance, or are they the product of iconographical codes, largely divorced from theatrical practice?'⁸

In the case of these penny-plain prints, most conform to the conventions of the illustrative genre, presenting standard poses that offer little individualized insight into the performer beyond presenting a likeness of her facial features.

Many, including a print of 'Madame Vestris as Don Giovanni' published by Hogson (Figure 1), allow the viewer to gaze on her legs, which became what Joseph Roach

defines as *charismata* or ‘marks of strength’.⁹ In such visual representations, Vestris’s legs became a signifier of not only her attractiveness, but also her supposed propensity for erotic behaviour. This is demonstrated by a particularly risqué toy theatre portrait of Vestris in the same role published by J. Dyer. In it, the skirt of Vestris’s tunic is partially open to the waist, revealing a tantalizingly large glimpse of her thigh.¹⁰

Such pictorial depictions of her cross-dressed roles, which were widely available and often sold in shops selling toy theatres and juvenile drama, could be enjoyed innocently or might offer a sexual frisson: interpretation of the signs depended on the consumer. They thus mirror the different responses to the theatrical performance shown in the textual commentaries.

In an illuminating article on Vestris’s transvestite roles, Kathy Fletcher reveals how her sexuality and gender were central to the appeal of the extravaganzas in which she appeared.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, in pictorial representations of these stage roles Vestris’s gender is foregrounded even when her legs are not featured. For example, in an engraving of her as Paul from James Cobb’s musical drama *Paul and Virginia*, published as the frontispiece of Oxberry’s *Memoir of Madame Vestris* in 1826, the scarf she wears is draped in such a way that it draws attention to her decidedly unmasculine poitrine.¹² Another pointer to her feminine sexual identity is given in the elegant positioning of the fingers of her small hand as she tips her hat.

The presence of signs indicating different gendered identities produces a fluid sensuality. Such images concur with Leigh Hunt’s observation on reviewing her portrayal of Macheath in John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*: ‘In a word, we ever remember an instance of an actress who contrived to be at once so very much of a gentleman, and yet so entire and unaltered a woman.’¹³ This ambivalence is also present in the text of the memoir, which, like the other volumes constituting *Oxberry’s Dramatic Biography and Histrionic Anecdotes*, voices a concern with women’s moral behaviour.¹⁴ The author mixes fascination for her accomplishment and charms



Figure 1. ‘Tuppence-coloured’ portrait of Eliza Vestris as Don Giovanni, published by Orlando Hogson, c. 1831–33. Author’s collection.

with a censorious recounting of her ‘frailties’ and conduct. The chief cause of outrage is her avarice, which carries connotations of prostitution:

MADAME VESTRIS has done more to degrade her profession, by suffering the impression to go abroad that she could be bought, than the talents of fifty such actresses could remedy. . . . Had the lady, of whom it is our unpleasing task thus to speak, erred from the feelings of nature, had she even emulated Catherine in the number of her lovers, as long as passion had been her only incentive, we should have closed our pages to her errors, and cast a sign, but no reproach, over her frailties.¹⁵

As well as displaying anxiety over the libidinous woman of dubious appetite, fears about transgression of class boundaries through social climbing are at play.



Figure 2. Portrait of Vestris by Rosa Emma Drummond in an engraving by Woolnoth as it appeared in *La Belle Assemblée*, July 1820. Author's collection.

Suggestions of luxurious living are also present in an early offstage picture of Vestris (Figure 2) that circulated alongside the cross-dressed images. It is based on a painting by the miniature artist Rose Emma Drummond (alleged to be the model for Miss La Creevey in Dickens's *Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*).¹⁶ Published in the monthly periodical *La Belle Assemblée* in July 1820 in a series of 'biographical sketches of illustrious and distinguished characters', a glamorous Vestris appears in what Clifford John Williams identifies as fashionable Parisienne style.¹⁷

The feminine beauty epitomized by the jewelled tiara nestling in dark curls does not fit well with the text discussing her transvestite roles, but might be expected to appeal to the female readership the fashion magazine courted. As a rare example of an image aimed directly at women, it is at odds with Rachel Cowgill's assertion that 'Vestris is unusual amongst actresses of the nineteenth century in that she exists for us only through the male gaze'.¹⁸ Importantly, her legs, the

signifier of her sexually titillating identity, are absent. Instead, the signs all point to the refinement of the social elite.

Partly due to the provocative roles she played and also because she was associated with a dissolute Regency set, Vestris became the focus of much sardonic attention. Satirical print culture was at its height in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and, as Jim Davis notes: 'Caricature helped both to establish and to undermine the actor's public image or persona.'¹⁹ This is evident in images of the actress that appeared in publications such as *Figaro in London* and caricature magazines such as *The Looking Glass*.

In an 1827 print, 'The Select Vestry Men' (Figure 3), she is depicted outside the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, in costume as Macheath and surrounded by admirers. It is not necessary to read the speech bubbles in which the men assert their sexual rights over the actress they have bankrolled to understand the implication that Vestris is prostituting herself. The eye is immediately drawn to her fulsome thighs by their central positioning within the composition. Even more suggestively, the shading on the light-coloured fabric hints at the *mons pubis* and pubic hair.

The etching was published as a single sheet by S. W. Fores, who ran a gallery-style print room in Piccadilly catering for fashionable, high-end customers.²⁰ Although the initial numbers of purchasers of the print is likely to have been relatively small, the image would have been viewed by others through its appearance in the printshop window and lounge, and by being circulated in albums of satirical prints that were hired or circulated privately among men.²¹

The print forms an interesting counterpoint to George Cruickshank's illustration of Vestris in Pierce Egan's popular serial *Life in London* in 1821.²² Titled 'The Green Room at Drury Lane Theatre: Tom and Jerry Introduced to the Characters in Don Giovanni', the picture shows Vestris clad as Giovanni and once again encircled by men. Jacky Bratton notes that the portrait lacks the 'edge' of sexual anxiety that the story evokes,

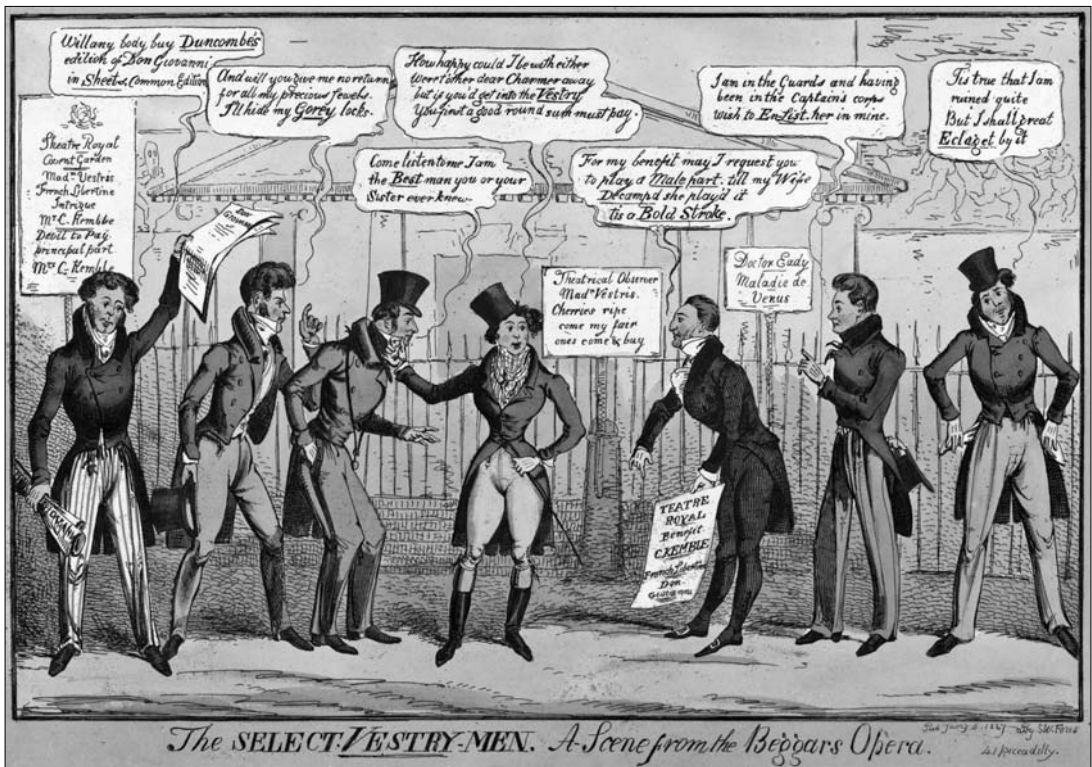


Figure 3. Satirical print of Vestris with her admirers, published by S.W. Fores in January 1827. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

since Vestris's costume 'terminates at mid-thigh to reveal shapely legs in white tights – not the whole lower body as displayed by the men'.²³ Egan's text was not targeted at a single-gendered readership, and the stark disparity in emphasis in the two images can therefore be attributed to the differing intended consumers of the images.

Both examples illustrate how Vestris's celebrity status was exploited to make money for third parties. Among those who capitalized on her popularity were the publishers of sheet music for the songs she performed, such as 'Buy a Broom', and ceramics factories in Derby and Worcester that fashioned porcelain figurines of her in some of her famous roles. Most notoriously, Mr Papera, an Italian modeller who created and sold plaster of Paris moulds of Vestris's famous limbs, came to public attention in January 1831 when he alleged their theft by one of his journeymen to a police court. The incident duly became the subject of a satirical etching by William Heath published by S.

Gans titled 'A Connoisseur', which portrays a man admiring the copies with a speech bubble revealing his wish that 'Some kind friend would *divide them* with me.'²⁴ The pun is replicated in a verse from a contemporary broadside, 'Madam Vestris's Legs', recounting Papera's conversation with the magistrate:

Then sir, says the laughing Magistrate,
I now must ask you, whether
The legs of Madam Vestris,
Could not be kept together.
I swear the handsome legs were mine,
And hope you'll give the thief a dose,
For it was not in my power,
To keep the legs together close.²⁵

The crude implication is that Vestris herself chooses not to keep her legs closed, thereby offering herself for male penetration.

Such images and texts reflect the discourse of the patriarchal society and testify to the dominant mode of viewing women from the perspective of its favoured sex. The male gaze, as originally theorized by Laura

Mulvey in relation to portrayals of women in Hollywood film, 'projects its fantasy on to the female figure'.²⁶ In Mulvey's psychoanalytic analysis, in addition to experiencing the pleasure of looking, the male spectator subconsciously registers unease due to his fear of castration: 'Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified.'²⁷ This co-existing fascination and anxiety is evident in the portrayals of Vestris.

In its report of the court proceedings, *The Times* noted that Papera claimed the actress had "'stood" to have a cast taken of her leg'.²⁸ If this were true, she was colluding in the marketing of her body. Yet this was not a new phenomenon. Arguably any female performer who posed for a 'high art' portrait could be said to be marketing her physicality, even when portrayed in idealized or symbolic representations of the tragic or comic muse. Moreover, numerous actresses had been commodified in chinaware and other decorative objects.²⁹ Nevertheless, the fact that Vestris was effectively sanctioning the fetishization of her body parts would appear to legitimate the sexualizing of her image and to collude with the subjugation imposed by the male gaze.

In contrast to this willing (or expedient) submission, Vestris entered a new phase of her career in 1831 (the same year as the Papera case), taking on the management of the Olympic Theatre. She must have been acutely aware of the power of images in shaping her public identity by this time, and thus it is probable that she considered it in planning her productions to attract paying customers. Applying the theories of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, I have argued previously that the theatre of the 1830s can be viewed as a field (*champ*) of cultural production in which Vestris sought to create a unique position by creating an exclusive identity for her new establishment.³⁰

She instituted a number of reforms that suggest she was targeting the higher end of society. For example, her refurbishment of the Olympic's auditorium served to make the environment and ambience more appeal-

ing to a refined audience. In line with this, her ticket-pricing policy of one shilling for a seat in the gallery effectively excluded the lowest end of the market.³¹ She also decided to end performances early, thereby enabling middle-class spectators to return to the suburbs by midnight.³²

Taken together, these measures encouraged the presence of audience members drawn from the higher end of the social spectrum, with associated levels of income and education, whose members were likely to share certain dispositions or taste preferences – or, in Bourdieu's terms, *habitus*.

Vestris's decision to stage classically themed burlettas during her opening productions and as her Christmas entertainments for the next five years corresponds to this *habitus* and draws on the cachet of high culture.³³ That is not to suggest that Vestris had a deliberate marketing policy of targeting her productions to meet an acknowledged demand, and Bourdieu argues against such a 'reductionist vision'.³⁴ Instead, her doxic understanding of culture corresponded with the dispositions of a large section of the audience.³⁵ Maria Shevtsova's emphasis on the fact that fields of production 'function in *cultural contexts*' points to the value of analyzing the Olympic's repertoire in terms of the sociocultural meanings it generated in the specific era.³⁶

In this light, Vestris's choice of extravaganza (an alternative description for burletta) is significant for, as Fletcher argues, one of its features was that it 'could utilize physical display in a way which tended to reduce the female to a collection of body parts and bordered on the pornographic'.³⁷ It is likely that Vestris chose as the signature pieces of her new theatrical endeavour productions that would require her to wear revealing costumes, correctly anticipating that images of these would circulate and provide publicity.

Vestris as Venus: Goddess and Flirt

It is useful to focus on the significance of one particular burletta role in order to complement Moody and Fletcher's explorations of how Vestris's sexual identity was tied to the



Figure 4. Lithographed print of Vestris as Venus in Planché's extravaganza *The Paphian Bower*, published by G. E. Madely. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

parts she played.³⁸ In James Robinson Planché's 1832 extravaganza *The Paphian Bower, or Venus and Adonis*, Vestris played Venus, the Roman goddess of love and sex, a suggestive choice with a subtext that was surely registered by part of the potential male audience. With regards to the Galatea myth, Gail Marshall suggests the adoption of classical drapery 'seems to have enabled the actress to signal to her audiences a "chaste permission to desire"'.³⁹ The diaphanous outfit depicted in the lithograph of Vestris's Venus, printed and published by G. E. Madely (Figure 4), combined with the actress's pose of one hand elevated and the other lifting the hem of her skirt to reveal her calves and ankles, encourages the lascivious rather than chaste appetite. Tracy Davis's comments on erotic material in monthlies from later in the century help to explain the suggestiveness of this pose:

Because the sexualized context relies on references to more overtly pornographic literature . . . and a long pictorial tradition of inferred sexuality in the subject, the knowing reader of these illustrated weeklies sees more than appears to be represented. Thus, any candid or posed photograph that gives an excuse for a posterior view or lifted skirt alludes to rape or invites sodomy.⁴⁰

Evidence of the hidden sexual coding also comes from the production of *The Paphian Bower* itself. Immediately after Vestris's final speech, in which she addresses the audience in a conflated persona as both Venus and herself as owner of the Olympic, the stage directions read: 'Music—The BOAR is brought in, in procession, by CUPID, &c., forming the picture by Westall.'⁴¹ The realized painting referred to here is Richard Westall's *The Boar That Killed Adonis*, painted in 1799 and widely distributed in engraved form. In this, as in all his images of Venus, the goddess is

naked. On stage, Vestris is clothed, but not, it can be deduced, in the audience's imagination.

The sexual message behind the Venus association is further confirmed in 1842 by the cover of the first edition of the semi-pornographic weekly serial *The Exquisite*, which features a version of *The Paphian Bower* portrait. The image of the actress is framed with a decorative border that includes the banner of the magazine and a dancing girl with a suggestive leg pose. In the lower foreground two men observe Vestris's performance: one, a military gentleman with a plumed helmet, lounges in a chair and holds a drinking glass; the other, presented from the back view, stands and examines her through a magnifying glass. The men, like the publication's readers, are voyeurs, looking at Vestris, whose bodily position calls to mind the *putica* pose in which a female nude is depicted covering her genitals with one hand.

Simulating a 'Private Audience'

Nanette Salomon argues that public viewing of paintings and statuary of female *putica* nudes functions as a bonding experience for heterosexual males:

The representation of 'pudicated' women therewith allowed for the diversification of the western male population into power hierarchies by providing them all with a common 'natural' and 'essentially manly' site of mastery.⁴²

The cover of *The Exquisite* both encapsulates and facilitates such homosocial situations. Moreover, the presence of the drinking male means the illustration does not represent a performance at the Olympic Theatre, as the audience could not imbibe in the auditorium. Thus the composite image hints at the possibility of a 'private audience' with the actress.

Vestris's status as the object of the male gaze is reinforced by the accompanying text, which lists 'her "favoured" lovers, amongst whom, however, the chief have been T. Duncombe, John Phillipson, Lord Castlereagh, and Charles Matthews [*sic*], her present hus-

band' – some of whom appear in Figure 3. It also praises her body:

Perhaps the symmetry of her form has never been equalled by any of her professional contemporaries; and as a sample of feminine beauty, in reference to classical proportion, the model of her leg and foot – still occupies a conspicuous site in the studios of the sculptor and the artist.⁴³

The reference to her popularity as an artist's model, in the context of a publication whose subtitle advertised its 'amorous adventures, piquant jests, and spicey sayings', is itself suggestive. In some of the many published memoirs that purported to be about Vestris but which contained unsubstantiated or blatantly untrue stories, an assertion is made that she was painted by the pseudonymous 'Kang-Kook', who made his fortune in India and then entered Parliament. According to the *Memoirs of the Life, Public and Private Adventures of Madame Vestris*, published in 1836:

Madame Vestris could not escape his notice, and he has her painted in various attitudes as Venus, all of them in a state of nudity; these pictures have silk curtains before them, and are like the veil of the Jewish sanctum sanctorum, only withdrawn for the gratification of the elect. Whether the lady sat or laid for these designs, is left for the reader to find out.⁴⁴

The writer states that he has not himself seen the canvas but its existence is well known. Whether or not there is any foundation to this scurrilous claim scarcely matters, for it succeeded in colouring perceptions of Vestris. Furthermore, it is surely significant that she is said to pose as Venus.

In their edited volume *The Manifestations of Venus*, Caroline Arscott and Katie Scott argue the representation of Venus as a subject in art is perforce linked with classical statuary of the near-naked goddess.⁴⁵ This is especially true in the early nineteenth century with the discovery of the *Venus de Milo* on the Aegean island of Melos in 1820 and its subsequent display at the Louvre in Paris. At this time, Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary*, first published in 1788, was a key source for information on Greek mythology. In the entry on Venus, Lemprière differentiates bet-

ween three surnames given to the goddess by the ancients:

The first of these she received as presiding over wantonness and incestuous enjoyments; the second because she patronized pure love, and chaste and moderate gratifications; and the third because she favoured the propensities of the vulgar, and was fond of sensual pleasures.⁴⁶

Thus the figure of Venus had dichotomous associations and could represent both purity and sexual abandon. When Vestris performed as the goddess on the stage, chaste members of the audience could interpret her as a figure of romantic love while, at the same time, others viewed her as an eroticized embodiment of lust.

Moody confirms this duality, arguing that Vestris's mythological pieces 'offered audiences the illusion of respectability' while enabling Vestris 'to market herself, and by extension the Olympic Theatre, as a realm of luscious sexuality and female power'.⁴⁷

Questions of the balance between Vestris's overt sexuality and her authority surface again in a satirical depiction of her relationship with Charles Mathews, an actor in her Olympic company whom she married in July 1838 before setting off on a tour of the United States. Gossip circulated that this was contracted cynically to make her respectable in the eyes of the North American audience. Figure 5, 'MADAME V—, AND HER YOUNG TIGER', lampoons the union. The disproportionate size and position of the figures, with the emphasis on Vestris's buttocks and exposed décolletage, does not suggest a loving marriage, but, rather, that the toy boy is riding his partner for financial and sexual gain.

Given that the image was published in yet another scandalmongering memoir, Vestris's oversized bonnet is not required to conceal her identity but may hint that her thoughts are too crude to depict. Since Vestris holds a document and is depicted as the figure of greater stature, Tracy Davis deciphers the image as 'a skilful negotiation with what was . . . a new allocation of power: the "wo-manager"'.⁴⁸ To my mind, however, the overriding impression is derogatory of Vestris, the old mare.



Figure 5. Illustration of Vestris and her husband, Charles Mathews, from *Memoirs, Public & Private Life, Adventures, and Secret Amours of Mrs C.M. Late Mad. V. of the Royal Olympic Theatre* (London: J. Thompson, n.d.). © The British Library Board, 1203.k.6(8).

In the battle to control her public image, it seems no coincidence that at around the same time two more favourable portraits of the offstage actress were put into commercial circulation. The first of these is a more conventional portrait of Vestris as a fashionable private woman. The artist, Alfred Chalon, was an academician and a figure of respectability, having become Portrait Painter in Water Colour to Her Majesty in 1837. Chalon's painting, reproduced in an etching by H. Robinson and published in 1838, portrays Vestris as a sumptuously costumed beauty, accompanied by her pet dogs with a dangling piece of greenery suggestive of the natural world. The portrait is three-quarter length so the legs are omitted.

Figure 6. Coloured domestic portrait of Mathews and Vestris engraved by W. Clerk and printed by F. Glover. Author's collection.



Also dating from this time is the charming domestic scene by W. Clerk, titled 'Mr and Mrs Charles Mathews (Late Madame Vestris) at Home!!!' (Figure 6). Kristina Straub argues that there were constant attempts 'to domesticate actresses' sexuality' in the eighteenth century,⁴⁹ and an emphasis on domesticity became more marked in nineteenth-century society with the pervasive Victorian ideology of the 'angel in the house', whose proper sphere of action was in the private home.

Depictions of the actress away from the stage, as in Figure 6, play into this narrative and suggest her more 'authentic' self as a conventional married woman. Intriguingly, the meaning is undercut by the fact that, as Vestris holds the lead of her spaniel, she once again reveals her leg. While recognizing the different contextual frame, the observer still registers the previously established sign with its sexual connotations.

In decoding this image, attention should also be paid to the text of the caption. The wording punningly alludes to the 'At Home' one-man performances of Mathews's father in which the great monopolylinguist entertained audiences from 1817 until his death in 1835.⁵⁰ It also highlights the change in Vestris's nomenclature through the use of parenthesis. This might be understood as an attempt to terminate the connection with her feckless first husband and the scandal associated with her behaviour after he left, but

such an interpretation is complicated by the presence of the multiple exclamation marks. Should these be read as typical of the hyperbolic typography seen on contemporary playbills, or do they imply a sarcastic tone?

Later depictions of Vestris show the actress in character for various productions, but these illustrations are usually of scenes from the plays and appear alongside reviews in the theatre press. Such images serve a different function as publicity for the productions and theatres, and are less concerned with creating or maintaining the performer's identity. As an older married actress, Vestris appears to have lost her commercial celebrity appeal. Despite the fact that her more mature acting won her plaudits and her pioneering Shakespearean productions have become the subject of study, obituaries published after her death in 1856 dwell almost exclusively on her body and the earlier performances.⁵¹

Sara Lane as Performer

In comparison with that of Vestris, the iconology of Sara Lane (née Borrow, 1822–99) is more limited. Her professional life began in 1841, some twenty-six years after Vestris, and so it is important not to underestimate the differences between the eras in which they were active. Their social status was also markedly different, Lane's family background and early career being less exalted.

Figure 7. Hand-coloured print of Sara Lane as Jacqueline in Hazlewood's *The Brigand's Secret* at the Britannia Theatre, published by J. Redington, 1858. Author's collection.



She was born into a working-class family that had not previously been involved in the entertainment business. Her first professional engagements were as a singer performing at minor venues in Camden Town and Knightsbridge, thus she largely escaped the attention of the theatre press. In 1843, she was engaged at the Britannia Saloon in unfashionable Hoxton. Her association with this East End playhouse was to last for fifty-six years until her death at the turn of the century. Initially billed as Miss Wilton, she quickly gained popularity for her performances, particularly in comic and soubrette parts, multi-roles, burlesques, and pantomimes. Her status as the company's leading lady was confirmed by her marriage to the Britannia's owner-manager Samuel Lane.

The earliest public portrait of Lane was in the *Theatrical Times* in August 1848 and depicts the young actress as the eponymous Irish peasant in George Dibdin Pitt's melodrama *Kathleen, the Pride of Munster*.⁵² It

shows Lane to have dark hair and a tiny waist, a feature that reappears in photographs decades later, but offers no other markers of individuality. The next significant image appeared in 1858, the year in which Samuel Lane built a much improved and enlarged theatre.

On the opening night of the new Britannia Theatre, Lane appeared as Jacqueline Jaconetti, a wandering Savoyard in Colin Hazlewood's melodrama *The Brigand's Secret*. A penny-plain/tuppence-coloured likeness was produced by local printer John Redington (Figure 7) as one of a pair with George Clair as Matthioli in the same production. This type of artwork functions as a theatrical souvenir, being, in George Speaght's words, 'essentially a popular art for a popular audience'.⁵³ Comparing it with Figure 1, it is noticeable that although Lane's calves are in view, the pattern on her lower legs highlights the presence of thick stockings, and thus the image lacks the suggestiveness of Vestris's



Figure 8. Photographic portrait of Lane from the *Saturday Programme*, 29 April 1876. Author's collection.

portrait. This corresponds to reviews that describe Lane's natural on-stage charm. The *Theatrical Times*, for example, refers to the "naivete" and ease in her acting'.⁵⁴

Apart from an image of Lane on a 1856 playbill in one of her multi-role performances (George Dibin Pitt's *The Flirt*) and another illustrating a scene from the 1863 pantomime *Hickory Dickory Dock* in the *Penny Illustrated Paper*, there are virtually no representations of Lane as an actress during the 1850s and 1860s.⁵⁵ This absence might be attributed to the Britannia Theatre's marginal status as an East End establishment with a predominately working-class audience, as well as to the fact that Lane did not play tragic parts. She also did not feature on music covers in the way that many theatre and music-hall stars did, possibly because she only performed in one place, so her songs were not known beyond that venue.

From the 1860s, the most popular forms of theatrical portraiture were the photographic *carte-de-visite* and cabinet card, and Lane appears in a few of these.⁵⁶ Had she been a touring actress, it is likely that there would have been more, as photographs became a vital means of generating publicity for performers at each venue and for securing new employment contracts.⁵⁷

The most widely disseminated photograph of Lane is probably the one that was given away with the *Saturday Programme* on 29 April 1876 (Figure 8). With its plain background and the sitter's demure plaited hair style, the decorous image looks like a family portrait with nothing to suggest Lane's professional life. It is typical of what has been described as the 'democratization of the photograph', whereby a blurring of the distinction between celebrities and 'ordinary' people occurs since all classes can be photographed.⁵⁸ David Mayer thus distinguishes between

the image which depicts the actress undertaking and physically engaged in the role, and the portrait: a pictorial likeness of the passive, almost expressionless actress with no visible agenda apart from presenting an image of an attractive, well-gowned woman.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, photographs of the second type are significant because the women had more agency in presenting the image: in the photographer's studio they could determine the costume, pose, and expression offered to the camera. In this instance, Lane presents herself as an amiable woman of means. The fact that examples of the first of Mayer's categories are missing from photographic portraits of Lane marks a difference between her and her West End counterparts. It suggests there was little or no market for pictures of the Britannia's productions, almost certainly due to the relatively limited income of the theatre's audience.

Although there are no photographs of Lane in role, there are drawings of some of her characters in the annual pantomime. These appear primarily in the programmes of the Britannia pantomime from the mid-1880s. The first to feature Lane in role was

sold during the run of *King Tricke; or, Harlequin the Demon Beetle, the Sporting Duchess and the Golden Casket*, which opened on Boxing Day 1887. The souvenir programme is clearly aimed at a broad family market, as evidenced by the fact that the advertisements are for a local hat warehouse, a story by George Sims serialized in the *Weekly Dispatch*, a Hoxton maker and purveyor of jam, and free gifts given away with purchases of the comic magazine *Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday*.

Sold for twopence, the book contains the argument of the pantomime, a cast list, scene descriptions, a short history of the theatre, and simple illustrations of each of the main characters. Lane appears as Lady St Leger, the Duchess of Allscarlet (Figure 9). As befits her sporting character, there is little indication that the actress portraying the jaunty, narrow-waisted figure holding a riding crop is in her mid-sixties. In Balme's terms, the image seems to index the theatrical reality of performance. It offers no insight into Lane's own identity.

Lane as Manager

A more fruitful avenue for examining Lane's iconology is to look at images that comment on her management skills. Jo Robinson identifies similarities in the way Vestris, Marie Bancroft, and Sarah Bernhardt were depicted satirically as 'monstrous women, towering over their midget husbands'. With reference to depictions such as Figure 5, she asserts:

What these images – with their topsy-turvy rendering of gender and power – suggest is a real anxiety about the power of women usurping the traditional male power in theatrical business structures, a monstrous femininity which the step into management from out of the frame of the proscenium arch momentarily and disturbingly revealed to contemporary audiences.⁶⁰

While Robinson is right in relation to the actress-managers she mentions, the iconology of Sara Lane does not fit this description. Take, for example, Lane's appearance on the cover of the 31 May 1890 edition of the *Man of the World* (Figure 10, overleaf), a periodical from the same publishing stable



Figure 9. Programme illustration of Lane as Lady St. Leger in the 1886–87 Britannia Theatre pantomime *King Tricke; or, Harlequin The Demon Beetle, the Sporting Duchess and the Golden Casket*. Author's collection.

as the *Sporting Times*. The only other woman to have been so featured in the previous five months was Princess Mary Adelaide, Duchess of Teck. Male subjects included the explorer Henry Stanley, Charles Steward Parnell MP, artist Sir Frederic Leighton, admiral of the fleet Sir Henry Keppel, and the Marquis of Breadalbane.

Although a few members of the entertainment industry were featured, including James A. Bailey (the business partner of impresario Phineas Barnum) and the actor E. S. Willard (a member of Wilson Barrett's company and noted for his Shakespearian roles), Lane is an unlikely choice among these celebrities. Instead of portraying her as disproportionately large, the artist emphasizes Lane's short stature by including a large area of blank space above her. With her umbrella, sober grey ensemble, and direct gaze, the



Figure 10. Lane on the cover of the weekly newspaper, *Man of the World*, 31 May 1890. Author's collection.

subject looks businesslike. The accompanying text shows that the readership is not expected to have visited the Britannia and introduces the manageress as its 'presiding genius'.⁶¹

The image is typical of Lane's treatment as an honorary man. In the same year, her opinions about unionization are reported in the *Stage* in a column titled 'Views of Representative Men'.⁶² Even though the Britannia Theatre was perceived as outside the established first rank of venues, its owner-manager was recognized as an important figure, albeit on male terms.

Proof of her status in the capital's theatre world comes from the fact that she is caricatured in the press. These caricatures lack the satirical bite of those of the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth century, often appearing in journals that are primarily about or for the theatrical profession and therefore lack objective distance. In the *Entr'acte* of 1 October 1887, cartoonist Alfred Bryan depicts Lane wearing a fancy hat and once again

holding an umbrella, although it is topped this time with a trident (Figure 11).

The trident, a symbol traditionally associated with the figure of Britannia, functions as a sign of status, linking the name of the theatre with the nation. The monarchical pose reinforces this, as the umbrella is held in the position of a royal sceptre. Ironically, though it was Vestris who performed before Queen Victoria and who was painted several times by the monarch in her private notebooks, it was Lane whose image was associated with royalty, at least among her East End audience, and her obituary in the *Era* notes that she has often been termed 'Britannia's own queen'.⁶³

Another cartoon that plays on this association appeared in *Judy* in 1892.⁶⁴ Captioned 'The Other Lady who Can "Rule Britannia"', Lane stands in front of notices that proclaim her theatre is full. She poses with hands on waist, gazing directly at the onlooker as if to say, 'Look at me and my success.' She sports a top hat, a millinery item more usually associated with men although it was sometimes worn by women as part of a riding habit at this time. Lane's headgear indicates practicality and activity, and once again positions her as an honorary man.⁶⁵

References to capability and authority are also emphasized in the cartoons of her management that appeared in periodicals with specialist theatrical interests such as the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*. These are typically composite images featuring various aspects of her activity at the theatre. For example, in Alfred Bryan's cartoons in the 'Days with Celebrities' series published in the periodical *Moonshine* (Figure 12, on page 19), Lane is depicted as 'The Real Good Fairy of Pantomime'.⁶⁶ She is shown both on the stage, where the captions tells us 'She sings as well and is as charming as ever', and off, in one segment arriving at the theatre to the excitement of local residents and in another reading aboard a cross-Channel boat.

Her dresser exclaims at the number of costumes 'Missus' is going to wear this year and the packaging reveals these have arrived from Paris, attesting to the fashionable opulence of the theatre's productions. What

Erving Goffman would term Lane's 'backstage' and 'frontstage' are not in conflict here, with both contributing to her celebrity identity.⁶⁷

In the reference to her vacations in France, Lane, like Vestris, is shown to enjoy the privileges of wealth, yet within a different frame. Vestris's affluence was frequently viewed with suspicion or innuendo, as the early association with being funded by lovers still persisted. When her husband appeared in court in bankruptcy proceedings in 1844, Mathews caused laughter by referring jokingly to his wife's well-known extravagance.⁶⁸ Conversely, because of her well-known philanthropy Lane was not castigated for her financial success. Indeed, her wealth was a source of pride, having been honestly earned in the service of the East End.

Hence in the top left corner of the cartoon is the legend: 'The old ladies about Hoxton are never tired of talking about the good deeds of Mrs Lane.' Finally she appears in the guise of Britannia ruling her empire, which the motto on her shield declares is 'Open every evening'. Apart from this allegorical depiction, it is noticeable that in none of the segments of the cartoon is Lane portrayed in her managerial role.

In many respects Sara Lane appears to escape the confinement of sexist expectation in a way that Vestris never could. Her portrayal in caricatures is admiring, with no implication that female management is undesirable, inappropriate, or risky. No visual images have been found that seek to undermine her personal or professional integrity. Yet I contend that Lane's treatment can be read as a different manifestation of the sexism that Robinson identifies in her arguments about gender fear and power dynamics.

Rather than attacking her as monstrous à la Vestris, male artists neutralized the threat of the female manager by making Lane into a benevolent granny figure, admittedly helped by her physical appearance. Ironically, this is the culmination and the price of Sam Lane's campaign in the 1840s and 1850s to make his establishment respectable, denying any association with crime and prostitution.⁶⁹



Figure 11. Caricature of Lane by Alfred Bryan for the 1 October 1887 edition of the *Entr'acte*. © The British Library Board, LOU.LON 161.

In accounting for the differing treatments of the two women it is clear that Lane had several advantages over Vestris. Firstly, and somewhat perversely, in the form of geography and class, in that the Britannia was 'only' an East End theatre, occupying a less prestigious position in the field of cultural production. Unlike Vestris, Lane did not have the temerity to take over a high-class cultural institution such as Covent Garden. When Vestris did so in 1839, the celebrated actor William Macready tartly wrote in his diary: 'It is not a fitting spectacle – the national drama in the hands of Mrs Vestris and Mr Charles Mathews!⁷⁰ Secondly, the social context was more favourable for Lane. Vestris's career in the early nineteenth century was during a time of crisis over the condition of the theatre, and women were caught in the crossfire. As Katherine Newey points out in relation to women's theatrical writing:

In the emerging *laissez-faire* economic culture of the early nineteenth century . . . commercial pressures moved theatre into areas and genres in which it was problematic for women to venture, given the simultaneous emphasis on models of female behaviour and ideologies of femininity which increasingly required women to disengage from matters commercial or corporeal.⁷¹

Hence Vestris bore the full brunt of disapproval of women's engagement in theatre and managerial activity. In contrast, Lane's early management experience was shielded publicly by the fact that her husband was technically in charge. After Samuel Lane's death there does not appear to be any surprise or dissension at his widow's assumption of the *de facto* control of the theatre. Moreover, by the 1880s and 1890s, when she had more than proved her capabilities as an actor-manager, the rise of the New Woman saw females challenging expectations in many areas. The theatre as a whole was arguably more respectable, as was epitomized by Henry Irving's knighthood in 1895. Peter Thomson shrewdly observes that in conferring this honour Queen Victoria was 'confirming the respectability of success'.⁷² This was certainly the case for Lane, who died in 1899 leaving a not inconsiderable fortune of £126,000.

Lane's third advantage was that she was always more homely-looking than Vestris, whose bodily symmetry and bewitching legs attracted so many admirers. Then, as now, the shelf life of beauty is limited. In the book accompanying an exhibition about seventeenth- and eighteenth-century actresses, Shearer West notes the rarity of portraits of older actresses and characterizes the typical treatment as 'easy misogyny'.⁷³

Certainly, in a number of reviews Vestris was treated cruelly for ageing.⁷⁴ In a pre-Botox era, she was ridiculed for her overuse of white powder. Even her *charismata* became her *stigmata*, as her famous legs, the stable signifier of sex, were seen as incompatible with her mature years. Lane, on the other hand, had played old women in a number of her early roles, was never typecast by beauty, and, in her seventies, was still donning pantomime breeches without censure. She there-

fore lacked the fascinating but dangerous 'to-be-looked-at-ness' that Mulvey identifies with the female fantasy figure.⁷⁵

The iconology of these two figures reflects developments in artistic media as well as changing social attitudes. When the images are read alongside contemporary texts, the same pattern emerges of reflecting or challenging hegemonic gendered assumptions about women's roles and behaviour within the theatrical professions and society. They are clearly generated out of the 'social formation', to use Bryson's terminology.⁷⁶

The majority of the pictorial depictions of Vestris are framed by the male gaze. This might largely be seen as being beyond the control of the subject, but individual behaviour was also a significant factor in shaping the public identities disseminated in visual form. So, although both women are celebrity figures (the extensive national coverage of Lane's death and funeral confirms this), the repercussions of Vestris's more overt sexual appetite dogged her whole life. And whereas Lane was able to keep any transgressions in her offstage life private, Vestris's public image was always tied to her sexual allure, even if only by negative association as she grew older. Of the two, only Vestris was devalued by the taint of commercial commodification. Ironically, the pervasiveness and longevity of the visual imagery that had helped establish her as a celebrity contributed to this debasement.

In contrast, Lane was appreciated more for her sympathetic personality and professional accomplishments. Contemporary writing about her never challenges the appropriateness of a woman as a manager and her business abilities are taken for granted. As a biography published in the *Stage* in 1882 makes plain, her success is equally attributable to her 'womanly virtues' as to her 'business-like faculties' and 'artistic capabilities'.⁷⁷ Yet the very fact that her virtues are ascribed to her gender betrays the persistence of the hegemonic male perspective. Overall, despite the considerable achievements of both women as actor-managers, it is clear that neither was able to escape the prevailing discourse of gender difference.



DAYS WITH CELEBRITIES. No. 435.
A PANTOMIME QUEEN—MRS. S. LANE.

Figure 12. Lane in later life as depicted by Alfred Bryan in *Moonshine*, 4 January 1890. © The British Library Board, P.P.5272.p *Moonshine*.

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