

Institution: The Open University
Unit of Assessment: D34 Art and Design: history, practice and theory
Title of case study: Portraiture, gender and theatre: the first actresses
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>This project has disseminated high-quality research through collaborative, curatorial, published, TV and digital outputs with a strong public engagement agenda. It has raised public awareness of the important role of gender in the development of eighteenth-century theatrical culture, influenced the public programmes of national collections, and involved collaborations with disciplines of music, theatre history and drama companies. The research has generated public lectures, a major curated exhibition with the National Portrait Gallery <i>The First Actresses</i> (2011–2012) and a smaller show of modern actress portraits <i>The Actress Now</i>, TV and radio features, linked digital resources on the ‘Open Arts Archive’ (www.openartsarchive.org/oa), and substantial press interest.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The underpinning research, led by Professor Gill Perry, spans a historical period from the late seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century. This time span was extended to explore parallel issues of femininity and celebrity in modern visual culture (see below). The research has brought to public attention the important roles of gender and feminine portraiture in the development of early celebrity culture in late seventeenth and eighteenth century Britain. It has also highlighted the remarkable symbiosis between the theatre and the visual arts during this period, and the important roles of women in this synergy, stimulating debate in the press. Since 1994 Perry has published a series of articles and books which explore the symbiotic relationships between gender, visual culture and portraiture during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century (see references). This research examined the ways in which ‘feminine portraiture’ might be seen to represent broader social and aesthetic concerns that were also preoccupying critics and performers within the theatre.</p> <p>The ways in which representations of actresses were seen as both evidence of, and as a challenge to, dominant cultural ideas have increasingly been central to this research project. A series of journal articles written between 2001–05 explored the idea of the actress and her visual representations. These publications were accompanied by a series of public lectures and culminated in a major single-authored book, <i>Spectacular Flirtations</i>, published in 2007. The research underpinning this book has since been developed to explore the ‘feminine face’ of eighteenth-century celebrity culture, and formed the basis of Perry’s curated exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery (2011–12) and accompanying book, <i>The First Actresses: Nell Gwyn to Sarah Siddons</i>. The show was innovative in its focus on specific gender themes within eighteenth century celebrity culture, and in its exploration of a previously under-researched area, the visual representation of women in musical performance. The project also fostered strong links with scholars in the fields of theatre studies, music history and dance history.</p> <p>The underpinning research encouraged the National Portrait Gallery to use its collection to explore the continuing significance of feminine portraiture and the ‘feminine face’ of modern celebrity culture in the parallel show <i>The Actress Now</i>. Both exhibitions were accompanied by a collaborative international conference open to the public (that was sold out), and a series of public lectures.</p>
<p>3. References to the research</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bellamy, J., Laurence, A. and Perry, G. (eds) (2001), <i>Women, Scholarship and Criticism: Gender and Knowledge c.1790-1900</i>, Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2. Perry, G. (2002) ‘The spectacle of the Muse: exhibiting the actress at the Royal Academy’, in D. Solkin (ed.), <i>Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House</i>, London & Newhaven: Paul Mellon Centre and Yale University Press, pp. 111–126. 3. Perry, G. (2003) ‘Ambiguity and desire in late eighteenth-century portraits of the actress’, in R.

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Asleson (ed.), *Notorious Muse: The Actress in British Culture 1776–1812*, London and Newhaven: Paul Mellon Centre and Yale University Press, pp. 57–80.

4. Perry, G. (2004) 'Staging gender and "hairy signs": representing Dorothy Jordan's curls', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, vol. 38, no.1, pp. 145–165, ISSN 0013 2586.
5. Perry, G. (2007) *Spectacular Flirtations: viewing the actress in British art 1768–1820*, London & Newhaven: Paul Mellon Centre and Yale University Press; shortlisted for the Theatre Book Prize, 2008, at <http://www.str.org.uk/events/bookprize/archive/bookprize2007.shtml>.
6. Perry, G. (ed.) (2011) *The First Actresses: Nell Gwyn to Sarah Siddons*, catalogue/book for exhibition National Portrait Gallery (NPG) London, London: NPG and the University of Michigan Press; with chapters by Joseph Roach (Sterling Professor of Theatre at Yale University) and Shearer West (Director of the School of Humanities Oxford University).

4. Details of the impact

a. Knowledge transfer and cross-fertilisation

Non-academic impacts from this research have informed different communities, enabling a cross-fertilisation of ideas, resources and projects with many third-sector institutions. The research has both directly influenced the programming of the National Portrait Gallery and encouraged interdisciplinary links with institutions from British theatre. *The First Actresses* exhibition (which included 54 works and attracted over 25,000 visitors) involved collaborative work between researchers across different disciplines, museums and theatres (see 5.3). The V&A Museum and the Theatre Museum, the Garrick Club (London), the Maugham Theatre Collection at the National Theatre and Chawton House Library all provided exhibits and related lectures, and the theatre company East 15 contributed to the public programme.

Using shared digital resources with the National Portrait Gallery, the Open University has also provided open access online resources to accompany the exhibition, enhancing public engagement and knowledge transfer between the two institutions. The Open Arts Archive is being used to further this cross-fertilisation and global access (see 5.5). A collaborative international conference at the National Portrait Gallery in November 2011 which brought together specialists from the fields of theatre history, art history, performance, drama, music history, curating and literature, was open to the public and archived on the Open Arts Archive. East 15 contributed the first performance of a new play by Elizabeth Kuti *Enter a Gentleman* (see 5.5) below). The relevance of key gender issues to modern celebrity culture was explored in the parallel exhibition of portraits of modern actresses, *The Actress Now*, in the NPG in 2011–2012. Several contemporary actresses were invited to give gallery talks and media interviews on both exhibitions, including Joley Richardson, Anna Chancellor and Ramola Garai (see 5.3)

b. Public engagement, dissemination and extending debate

Each stage of this on-going research project was accompanied by a strategic programme of public engagement to the widest possible constituencies. Since 2003, Perry has given 29 invited public lectures or talks in the UK and abroad, based on the research outputs listed above. These have included lectures at Dr Johnson's House, The Georgian Society, The Holborne Museum Bath, V&A Museum, Copped Hall, Essex, two Women's Institute talks (see 5.6), Chawton House Alton, the Romney Society and eight public tours at the National Portrait Gallery. The project also involved a series of international lectures (in galleries and universities and open to the wider public) including Yale University, Hong Kong University, Massey University, Auckland Art Gallery and Auckland University, encouraging wider public engagement.

The First Actresses exhibition made accessible new research on the role of gender in the history of British theatre, and included important works in private collections which have previously been inaccessible to the wider public. The learning and interpretation programmes that accompanied this exhibition have included fourteen separate events with contributions from actors, theatre historians, dress historians and online support materials. Events and resources that highlighted the role and significance of feminine portraiture included a series of five podcasts produced by Perry with collaborating researchers from music history, dance history, theatre history and literature, and

featured five key works from the exhibition, and an iTunes U video (see 5.5).

c. The first actresses: media impacts

The exhibition provoked extensive media interest and debate, and received over 140 recorded UK press acknowledgements (excluding listings and international press). This included 56 reviews in national newspapers and magazines, 50 reviews or features in the regional press, and 39 features in arts and special interest and online publications (see 5.1 and 5.2). Press coverage revealed a consistent engagement with the key underpinning research theme: the critical importance and visibility of women and gender in theatrical culture of the period. Many reviews also focused on the research 'rediscoveries' featured in the exhibition, including Simon Verelst's portrait of Nell Gwyn (see 5.2) and *The Three Witches* by Daniel Gardner.

In one of three separate features in the *Guardian* Amanda Vickery emphasised its importance as 'the first show to explore the importance of women in early English theatre through portraiture', citing key aims to reveal that 'portraiture is always a form of dazzling performance, not a mirror image', and that 'the first actresses benefited from an emerging publicity machine that anticipated aspects of the modern star system' (see 5.1)). Richard Dorment of *The Telegraph* applauded the show's ambition to explore aspects of eighteenth century theatre by understanding careers and representations of women (see 5.1). Similarly, Matthew Reisz in the *Times Higher* wrote that 'alongside the spectacle..., we witness a resolute search for professional recognition and respectability' (20 October, 2011).

The exhibition was reviewed on Radio 4's *Front Row* and Gill Perry was interviewed for a BBC London News Report and for Radio New Zealand (April 2013). The exhibition themes influenced the shape of one of the BBC's 2012 anniversary series *Shakespeare Uncovered*. The episode titled 'Shakespeare's Women' included an interview between Richardson and Perry in the exhibition, exploring relevant gender issues. Shown in the UK on BBC2 in 2012 (and repeats on BBC4; in the USA, Canada and Australia (ABC) in March 2013), viewing figures totalled over three million (See 5.4 below). Lucy Worsley also filmed material in the exhibition for her three-part TV series *Harlots, Housewives and Heroines* on BBC4 (May 2012).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Press coverage of *The First Actresses* exhibition: 56 reviews in newspapers and magazines included:

Amanda Vickery, 'Rouges Gallery', *The Guardian*, 15.10.2011, online at

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/oct/14/paintings-first-actresses-national-portrait-gallery?newsfeed=true>;

Josa Young, 'Nell Gwyn to Sarah Siddons: Britain's pioneering early actresses', *Sunday Telegraph* 'Stella Magazine', 08.11.2011, online at

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/8811252/Nell-Gwyn-to-Sarah-Siddons-Britains-pioneering-early-actresses.html>;

Richard Dorment, 'The First Actresses; Review', *The Telegraph* 31.11.2011, online at

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/8861083/The-First-Actresses-National-Portrait-Gallery-review.html>

2. Features on rediscovered portrait of Nell Gwyn: included:

The Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/oct/18/nell-gwyn-first-actresses-exhibition?newsfeed=true>

Daily Mail

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2050520/Nell-Gwyn-portrait-Topless-painting-Charles-IIs-mistress-display.html?ito=feeds-newsxml>

Daily Telegraph - column by Charles Spencer

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/8841986/A-bloodless-Booker-Prize.html>

3. TV and Radio Coverage: included

BBC Radio Four *Front Row* – review by Romola Garai and Mark Brown

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b015zrdx>;

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BBC News, October, 2011 : Review of The Actress Now exhibition:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-15242534>;

Radio New Zealand, Gill Perry Interview with Kim Hill, 13 April, 2013

<http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/saturday/20130413>;

4. National Portrait Gallery (NPG) Information: *The First Actresses* visitor numbers over 25,000; 140 recorded press features (contact Press Officer NPG). The NPG Director wrote on 12/07/2013: 'The First Actresses was a very successful exhibition for the National Portrait Gallery, in which the academic knowledge and curatorial skill of Professor Gill Perry was put to tremendous public benefit. The exhibition brought together outstanding portraits of great interest in their own right, which also fascinated and informed the many visitors and commentators in relation to issues of gender and representation. It is a project that will continue to resonate for many years informing curatorial work, TV features, public lectures and media debate'.

5. Online Digital dissemination

Open access digital outputs with *The First Actresses* include:

- iTunesU video 'Raising Awareness of Women's Roles in Portraiture':
<http://www.open.ac.uk/research/main/research-impact/raising-awareness-women%E2%80%99s-roles-portraiture>.
- Online Collaborative Conference streamed on the Open Arts Archive and linked to the NPG site, and including a performance by theatre group East 15.
<http://www.openartsarchive.org/oaarchive/519>
- 5 podcasts streamed on the Open Arts Archive (<http://www.openartsarchive.org/oaarchive>) on individual portraits discussed by specialists from art history, literature, drama and dance history:
<http://www.openartsarchive.org/oaarchive/search/node/first%20actresses%20podcast> (4 links also below)

These podcasts included:

a) Dr Berta Joncus on Jeremiah Davison's *Portrait of Kitty Clive*, 1735, Longleat House:

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/oaarchive/content/dr-bertha-joncus-discusses-jeremiah-davison%E2%80%99s-portrait-catherine-%E2%80%98kitty%E2%80%99-clive-1735-longleat>

b) Dr Lucy Peltz on Daniel Gardner's *Three Witches from Macbeth*, 1775, The National Portrait Gallery, London: <http://www.openartsarchive.org/oaarchive/content/dr-lucy-peltz-discusses-daniel-gardner%E2%80%99s-three-witches-macbeth-1775-national-portrait-galler>

c) Dr Moira Goff on John Ellys's *Portrait of Hester Booth*, c1722-25, the V&A Museum:

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/oaarchive/content/dr-moira-goff-discusses-john-ellys%E2%80%99s-portrait-hester-booth-c1722-25-va-museum>

d) Professor Judith Hawley on *James Gillray's 'Dilettante Theatricals: - or - a Peep at the Green Room'*, 1803, The National Portrait Gallery, London:

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/oaarchive/content/professor-judith-hawley-discusses-james-gillray%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%98dilettante-theatricals-or-%E2%80%93-peep-green-ro>

6. Wider public engagement (testimonial)

The Programme Organiser, Dyfed, Women's Institute: 'Following Gill Perry's visit to our regional Women's Institute to lecture on "The First Actresses" in 2011, the group were so inspired by her research on women and their achievements in eighteenth century theatre, and the forthcoming exhibition, that we arranged a bus trip for over 40 people from the Dyfed region to visit the exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, where she also gave us a special guided tour. We all gained much from her presentations and the stimulating exhibition. It changed our views of women's roles in the theatre.'