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# Grave Matter: Contestations in Actress Burial

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GRAVE MATTER: CONTESTATIONS IN ACTRESS BURIAL

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
of the Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Theatre

by  
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For Geoff, with love and gratitude.

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## Abstract

Death disrupts. The social space accorded to rituals of death and memorialization differs from all other spaces. Actresses disturb. Society contests, determines, and enacts the burial of an actress as her final performance. This study explores the actress burial as a site of meaning.

Contestations over the fate of the actress body reveal power structures and the motivations of cultural institutions. This study highlights four actresses—Lecouvreur, Oldfield, Bernhardt, and Duse—whose burials cover a wide range of circumstances. Each chapter gives the relevant biographical information for the actress and the social background for the cultural contestation over the actress body.

Traditional history often overlooks the contestations of the burial moment in its attempts to find meaning from the recorded life. As a strategy for this study I ask, what if we take death not as the end but as the beginning of a new cultural operation? What if we posit the actress burial as a key time in a process that continues to produce social meaning even as the body that initiated the action disappears from view?

Currently, actress burials in the theatrical historical record provide a starting point without a meaningful exposition. Without an evaluation of what occurred after an actress's death, neither an actress's effect on a culture or that culture's effect on her can be understood. Actresses not only embody a signifying/surrogacy function, their burial also reflects the culture's attitude toward women. The intensified reaction to actresses ranges from extreme antitheatrical prejudice to worshipful admiration, strikingly displayed in the fate of the actress body.

## Introduction

Death disrupts. Death and its rituals create a unique social space. Actresses disturb. Actresses publicly perform the idea of “woman.” This performance represents yet also challenges the culture. Death ends the actress’s active role in life as cultural surrogate but not her impact on society. Social forces contest, determine, and enact her final rites. This study explores the actress burial as a site of meaning in that moment when society addresses the void left by actress death.

The disposal of the dead indicates the beliefs of a culture, especially when the dead individual also represented the society as a whole. The pyramids of Egypt and the terracotta warriors of China bear witness to the scale of commemoration possible when a leader dies. Actresses resemble rulers in widespread social recognition (but differ markedly in their relationship to power). The death of a famous figure, leader or actress, is a loss felt by the entire collective. Throughout recorded history social discourses compete to fill the gap left by death, and society’s power structures are sharply revealed in the treatment of the dead

Nor has the situation changed today. Everywhere government, religion and other social forces still determine the honors given the dead. Sati continues in India because the stigma of widowhood persists (Narasimhan). In 1997 the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs of the U. S. Congress prohibited burial or memorialization of certain criminals in certain cemeteries. In 1999 the incredibly wealthy on Long Island vied for the chance to be buried near the illustrious dead and to purchase extra lots for exclusivity and memorials (Harden). The deaths of Princess Diana and John F. Kennedy Jr. prompted memorials by and for the public, floral and trinket tributes attesting to the iconic power of these popular media idols. Burial and the remembrance of the dead continue their hold on the popular imagination.

Death ends a person’s life, but burial provides a final display of a person’s social significance. Traditional history often overlooks the contestations of the burial moment;



historians typically follow a life chronologically and close the account with the death of the subject. Biographers may at times start at the gravesite with a description of the burial or the tombstone, but then, as a rule, return their focus to chronicling the life of their subject. In these examinations death ends the active accumulation of meanings for that life, and the subsequent significance of that life depends on what occurred before the burial. As a strategy for this study I ask, what if we take death not as the end but as the beginning of a new cultural operation? What if we posit the actress burial as a key time in a process that continues to produce social meaning even as the body that initiated the action disappears from view?

Although usually unacknowledged as an intersection of social meaning, actress burials do feature as a prominent part of the theatrical historical record. Biographers of actresses often conclude with the obsequies or descriptions of grave sites, but offer no further comment or analysis. In actress autobiographies, of course, the question of the writer's burial does not arise. For obvious reasons autobiographies do not and cannot investigate the social meaning of the subject's burial. But even biographies, such as the fine psychological examination in Ruth Brandon's 1991 book on Sarah Bernhardt or Joanne Lafler's comprehensive work on Anne Oldfield, devote minimal space to *why* society reacts the way it does to the death of an actress.

Biographies tend to present information as an elegiac offering, a worship space created for the memory of the actress. Therefore biographers usually examine the interment rituals of the actress as a commemorative reaction to the actress and her art rather than as a manifestation of cultural anxieties or discontents. Biographical treatments often become hagiographic. In the context of elegiac praise, any expansion of rites seems the natural response to the tremendous loss experienced by the society—so natural, in fact, that the biographer gives little or no further explanation of the phenomenon.

If, contrariwise, social forces curtailed the rites to a minimum or eliminated them entirely, the biographer feels impelled to give a reason for this disrespect. Usually the biographer seeks to explain this contradiction by one significant cultural factor and leaves it at that. Such a reference explores only a small section of the cultural landscape.

Biographers, historians, journalists and writers of all sorts use death as a dramatic conclusion or a stirring opening for their accounts. But actress death offers greater opportunity. Death is a pivotal moment, an ideal place to start an examination of social forces in theatre history. The deaths of actresses in particular create a complex struggle among the institutions that shaped their lives. Whether embodying society's model of ideal womanhood or subverting it, many actresses achieve fame verging on immortality. When the actresses themselves prove mortal, their deaths create a different type of cultural phenomenon, an absence that society rushes to fill with its own preoccupations. The actress, no longer able to claim a position of her own, becomes a site of contestation. Groups may freely speak for (in both senses) or against her without fear of interruption from the woman who once spoke so often in public. Her voluntary surrogacy for the playwright gives way to her unwilling cultural surrogacy.

Whether an actress's death sparks tribute, debate, or even attempted erasure, it lays bare cultural discontents, ambitions, and anxieties. Attitudes towards women, theatre, and the socially volatile combination of women in theatre mean that such a death becomes a crisis moment in culture. Actress burials and the treatment of the actress body allow us to study how these forces interact in a performance at once cultural and theatrical. That is, actress burials occur within and beyond the symbolic structures of theatre. Actress burials are contained within the wider web of all the signifying practices that comprise a culture.

Joseph Roach explores some of the signifying power of the theatrical dead in his analysis of circum-atlantic performance, *Cities of the Dead*. In a new historicist

approach to Thomas Betterton's burial, Roach highlights the burial as a moment of culture in a heightened state. Tracing Betterton's surrogacy from stage to grave, Roach argues that just as an actor may embody the wishes of his audience, a corpse may also serve as surrogate for a wider public. Roach refers to the "chain of surrogations" (105) in which the memorials for the players eventually legitimate the culture. The corpse of a performer functions powerfully in the role of surrogate, bringing the signifying functions played in life into the rituals of death. In Betterton's case his stage roles allow him to stand in for both the monarchy and the African "other."

This study follows Roach's example by studying the cultural impact of several performer burials. However, I choose to focus on women. Actresses not only embody the same sorts of signifying/surrogacy functions outlined by Roach; their burial also reflects the culture's attitude towards women. Actresses cannot be understood or dismissed as the female equivalent of actors. Actresses are not feminized actors. Rather they occupy a position of their own, at times complementary or similar to that of actors but with significant differences. Qualities and characteristics attributed to actresses by society include both intensified versions of those associated with actors and others based on cultural perceptions of female sexuality. The intensified reaction to actresses ranges from extreme antitheatrical prejudice to worshipful admiration, strikingly displayed in the fate of the actress body. The gender of the performer heightens the confrontation of social forces in the disrupted/disruptive space of actress death.

What may we expect to find in this space, the site I describe as actress burial? Tracing new historicism back to the writings of Michel Foucault highlights how spaces such as actress burial show the workings of power within the social fabric. As Foucault demonstrated in the well-known exegeses that underpin so much of new historicism, social forces at work spring from power structures, emergent or already in place. As described by Foucault, these power structures determine policies and discourses that

advance their own agenda. Contestations over the fate of the actress body reveal these powers and their motivations.

Foucault's genealogies of culture provide an excellent model. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault describes the public effect of witnessing death and how discursive cultural formations become inscribed on the body of the condemned criminal. In his *History of Sexuality* he offers insights on how gender is structured into systems of power. Such premises form a basis for a general approach to actress burials because Foucault's work asserts that occasions of commemoration provide opportunities for the rhetorical insinuation of reification or subversion of the underlying regulatory institutions. The actress burial gives full play to all these.

Actress burial also adds a dimension to Foucault's occasion of commemoration because of the theatricality of the commemorated. New historicist Stephen Greenblatt follows Foucault's example, although his work more explicitly brings theatre into the mix. He suggests in *Shakespearean Negotiations* a view of the "social moment" as artistic inscription and collective invention of power in both society and art. Greenblatt's stress on the collaborative nature of theatre and culture reinforces the shifting power play of their points of contact. In addition, his collectivity of theatre audience members translates fairly easily to one of actress mourners. Greenblatt emphasizes the ways in which art becomes the medium for social energy and insists that the existence/persistence of history results from this process. I believe the energy of the burial ceremonies persists and may be decoded in a similar fashion.

In the burial moment theatre connects with the wider arena of culture in the body of the actress. In the course of an actress's career her influence often extends from the theatre to the culture at large. In this last moment, the type of influence changes. The power that the actress had as performer over the audience shifts to the power that the idea of the dead actress has over the perceptions of the mourners. The social contestations that determine the nature of the ceremony freight the event with powerful

energy that persists as history. Examining these burials reveals a different aspect of history, based on the social energy created by that moment.

These ideas from new historicism help guide my interpretations, but a productive study of these social contestations must acknowledge not only the gender coding implicit in any historical research but the specific manifestations of coding in these burials. Here the methods and concerns of feminist historiography dovetail with the needs of the investigation. Feminist historiography and new historicism share similar methodologies as Judith Newton shows when she notes how feminist scholars in the 1960s anticipated the new historicist method in their work. Both approaches focus on previously overlooked cultural activities like actress burials, but the concerns of feminist historiography make it particularly useful in a study of actresses.

Feminist historians began with the observation that traditional history tended to exclude or marginalize women (Scott 1966, 3). Feminist historians challenged the traditional concept of man as a signifier for humankind and related cultural perceptions, cracking what Sidonie Smith calls the “hard nut of its [the universal subject’s] normative (masculine) individuality” (3). In effect, feminist historiography attempted to shift history’s focus to make woman the subject.

Part of what made this change so important is how the universal subject obscured cultural operations. The idea of “man” as equivalent to human often hid the historical production of gender categories and led to oversimplified accounts of historical periods. Equally important, “man’s” seeming universality automatically positioned man as the only possible subject both of history and historical research, and kept women out of or on the margins of history. Feminist historiography often places woman/women in that subject role. For feminists, the quest to become a subject also reflects the struggle of women to acquire more active agency in their own lives. For instance, Ellen Donkin argues that when we look at women’s stories in theatre history as a whole, we see the actresses’ struggle for a subject position.

As objects, actress bodies remain embedded in the context of the career-long struggle of actresses to be active agents in their own stories. Actresses strive to create a distinct identity in the public mind. The image that actresses create lingers, and the cultural efforts to use/erase the actress death must co-opt or contend with it. The multiple contestations over the actress body tell a larger story, one that reveals both culture and the actress. Despite the non-agency of the actress body, at burial the actress at least becomes the subject of discussion. The eulogies, memorials, and elegies center on actress activities, however reinterpreted.

The paradox that dead women easily preoccupy culture while culture mutes the voices of living women takes its place among the other paradoxes of the historical subject and gender. Scott points out the paradoxes of a system with a notion of an abstract individual who could not be female (and thus, not abstract). Feminists must contradict the preoccupations of past historians and theorists to make room for women's concerns. Frequently this means finding the junctures where theorists contradicted themselves, as Scott shows with the paradox of abstract individuality in French political discourse (9).

When feminist historians such as Scott and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese work to effectively counter and explain historical perceptions as grounded not in essentialist truth or unalterable social roles but in ever changing cultural beliefs, they deliberately avoid the tradition of a single viewpoint in recorded history. When Fox-Genovese claims that women's history should complicate the historical process, she changes history's usual parameters. A straightforward, uncomplicated history no longer denotes an authoritative work, but an incomplete one. Any history that attempts to offer multiple viewpoints necessarily becomes complicated and frequently contradictory. This agrees well with the aims of new historicism in general, which investigates historical meaning in terms of ruptures and paradoxes.

Complex by design, feminist historiography has developed in several directions. To analyze the relationship of women and culture, the circumstances of women's lives must first be known. In her volume on feminist theory and theatre, Sue-Ellen Case starts where many feminist historians do, noting the absence, the erasure of women that often coincides with a reduction of women to their sexual function (10). In her article on feminist methodology in theatre history, Tracy C. Davis notes the work of recovering the lives of women previously overlooked in the historical record as one of two current feminist reassessments of theatre history (literary criticism is the other). Her own *Actresses as Working Women* attempts to document a wide-ranging group of actresses in the Victorian period and examine the cultural pressures on acting women and the economic exchanges that actresses often engaged in as public women and bodies for hire.

But feminist historians, such as Natalie Zemon Davis, point out that to recover this information and make women the subject of the discourse is not enough if that discourse remains separated from the mainstream of history. Only by studying women as part of history can we note the important part gender roles play in social life and historical change (79). As Gayle Rubin notes, the social system creates women's relationships. The housewife and the whore do not exist in a vacuum (106).

Feminist historiography thus must discuss the cultural practices that underlie perceptions of women. Although I believe women's culture consists of more than women's reactions to patriarchal containment and economic forces, these underlying realities help shape the continual process of gendering. As de Lauretis puts it, male rulemakers may view "woman" as a symbol, for truth, for evil, or for whatever currently discomposes the culture. But feminist historiography examines the cause and result of these symbol-making perceptions. In my study, actress bodies become such symbols, closely allied to but distinct from the cultural signification imposed on actresses during their lifetimes. Again, the absence of the living actress means that the perceptions that

create these symbols shape the contest over the fate of the actress body with no interference from the actress's perspective.

Another trend in feminist historiography views gender as a cultural perception. Janet Wolff stresses the participatory nature of gender identity, in that art creates as well as represents ideologies of femininity (1). Judith Butler describes gender as a constantly repeated performance. All women, including actresses, perform the female gender. But gender performance lacks the element of volition. In such models, gender is not only changeable, but simultaneously the result and cause of an ongoing process. Butler also incorporates in her model the notion of the body as a historical situation as Beauvoir claimed (272). Consider the body as a historical situation, and the circumstances of its final appearance/disappearance become especially significant.

Of the various approaches, this constructivist model of gender seems the most applicable to the study of actress burials. I posit that gender operates cyclically and erratically in cultural performance. Although the performance of gender often repeats, similar circumstances may not produce similar understandings of gender. Creating and created by many factors, no aspect of the culture, whether it be plays, poems, or burials, can be accepted as gender neutral. From the feminist viewpoint, any reference to a unitary idea of woman must be suspect. Such a reference immediately becomes a focus of inquiry as to how society created and used that idea. This study pursues the way in which actress bodies often serve as an idea of woman.

In trying to determine how society creates meaning from the actress body, the historian must study the artifacts of each period's culture for clues as to how the body was read. The signifier of the body connects to other signifiers in actress burial, creating a complex and changeable meaning. Lynda Hart believes theatre itself, where body, space and text join a swarm of signifiers, conveys meanings enough for playwrights to challenge fixed readings of gender (10–11).



Actress burials join the swarm of theatre signifiers to those of cultural ritual, creating a rich field for investigation. Every actress represents gender in performance. Possibly her past roles may conform to just one idea of womanhood. But usually her characters span the range of female types in the society. And all of the roles she played remain in the cultural memory at the actress burial. Since the final ceremonies add their own gender encoding, this results in multiplicitous and contradictory gender interpretations. How are the men who carry the actress to her grave related to the men who bedded or applauded her? If the stage showcased her as female and available, does lying in state negate her gender and/or her accessibility?

With women at least partially inscribed as subjects in the historical record, studies of women can move beyond recovery missions. By limiting my focus to a few well-documented actresses, in no need of rescue from oblivion, I hope to deepen our understanding of the social institutions glimpsed in these death dramas. The paradigm shift demanded by the inclusion of women's experiences in the historical records cannot be considered complete, but the increased documentation and interpretation of women's experience provides a starting point. Resistance continues to the no longer novel idea that women's lives matter, particularly when it disrupts canonical syllabi or programs of study. But the work done so far establishes the possibility of attempting more than basic documentation of the overlooked contributions of women to society. Establishing actress burials as key moments in theatre history builds on the work that has gone before. With women's lives and the study of gender included within the disciplinary boundaries of history, a more complex understanding of the past develops.

Such an understanding of the past requires a flexible feminist historiographic approach to examine the changeable nature of gender crossculturally and cross-temporally. Various elements of new historicism, found in the work done by Roach, Foucault, and Greenblatt, help support the study. My methodology for this dissertation looks at theories of historiography and theories of cultural representation in conjunction

with primary documents in an attempt to delineate a model of gender operations that will reveal cultural movements and the importance of actress burial to performances of gender and class.

Primary documents for this study include articles, letters, diaries, and early biographies. My subject encompasses four actresses and the many admirers and detractors who wrote about them and the cultures in which they lived. Cultural histories like Daniel Roche's *France in the Enlightenment*<sup>1</sup> and John Brewer's work on eighteenth-century English culture help provide the context for these actresses. The two actresses from the eighteenth century died at a time when professional writers and amateurs alike delighted in writing epitaphs and poetic tribute, and social protest sometimes came rhymed and metered. The two who died in the twentieth century did so in the era of the daily newspaper and the beginning of global communications.

All four women, all four actresses, belong to a well-documented group of stars, notable and noted already. The burials put these women at the center of the cultural process, which genders and is gendered, which transforms and is transformed. In this instance, the operations of culture on the bodies of women proved more complex than those evident in the disposal of the men's bodies. In this study woman/actress, not man/actor, serves as universal subject. In a small reversal of usual historical practice, these observations of cultural systems put actress bodies in the center of theatre history and not on the margins.

My contribution to the discourse is the contention that without an evaluation of what occurred after an actress's death, neither an actress's effect on a culture or that culture's effect on her life and memory can be understood. The performing life of an actress ends not with her death, but with her burial and even beyond. Important audience reaction may continue long after her final stage appearance. The burial

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<sup>1</sup> Roche starts his account with an applicable comment on death: "The death of a monarch forces any society to interrogate itself" (1).

performance thus provides a rare opportunity to study a woman-centered space in primarily patriarchal cultures.

Yet studying actress deaths paradoxically risks reducing these women to the same sort of signifying or commodity role originally imposed by the culture, creating another imagined category of women. Butler writes about this type of category creation in her assertion that in the attempt to make women visible, feminists may create a category that may or may not represent actual women, causing a renewed ghettoization of women's lives. She also notes that the category of woman demands the examination of the power relationships and the discourse that create it ("Performative" 274 & 281). The existence of the category itself becomes a mark of woman's subaltern status, while the concept of man eludes similar categorization by its simultaneous claims to universality and individuality. In contrast, the concept of woman never embraces the universal, and, as Joan Wallach Scott points out, society often denies women the right to be perceived as individuals (*Only* 32). This reduces women to a monolithic and secondary group, oversimplifying and underestimating their cultural importance. This applies to women both in their own time and in the historical record.

As I imagine the category of dead actress as cultural space and historical occasion, I risk nullifying her individuality and all but the residue of agency in her own life. Viewing an actress's death as a nexus for cultural neurosis diverts attention away from the actress herself. Her death becomes a precipitating incident rather than the end of a notable life, and her individuality may disappear. Alternatively, writing biography to show the importance of that individuality draws dangerously near eulogy and gives the false impression that a listing of events accurately represents a life story. Any investigation must acknowledge these opposing dangers and, to some extent, show how individual and culture interact in telling the life of an actress.

The actresses themselves may at times disappear from these pages. Yet the reasons why the burials of these actresses (and not others) became major crisis

moments in culture often lie in their personal histories. I include biographical material that helps explain the extraordinary reaction to each actress death. The description of how these women interacted with social conditions reclaims actress space in the history of culture and performance. The eulogizing impulse must be acknowledged and balanced against the actual impact of the actress burial.

Although I realize the perils of erasing the woman in showing the cultural operations, and believe in the need to create a space for women and their concerns in both their convergence with and divergence from the dominant culture, this work does not attempt to reclaim the lives of its subjects. Biographies already exist that attempt to reveal the individuality of these four actresses. This study takes a wider view. It documents the position of actresses in society and places actress burials within a cultural context to create a new understanding of culture and its discontents.

In an accurate but perhaps infelicitous metaphor, this study breaks new ground. Despite continuing interest in actresses and their social position and a human fascination with death and commemoration, no study in theatre history focuses on this crucial juncture of individual and culture. Nor will this work attempt a chronological and exhaustive examination of the cultural and historical variations of actress burial. Instead, by restricting the view to four actresses whose burials cover a wide range of circumstances, I will attempt to highlight a few cultural contestations evidenced by the struggles over the actress body. Each chapter gives the relevant biographical information and the cultural background that set the stage for the final burial struggle.

Actresses represent their societies as powerfully in death as in life. Power relations, gender, theatrics, all are layered upon this pivotal moment in cultural performance. My study connects the historical events of actress burials to the cultural disputes over religion, social class, public image, and nationalism. Each of the four actress burials considered in depth in my research reflects these factors and others. In each burial I will show how one cultural contestation dominated the discourse. In

addition, the extremes of these particular burials highlight conflicts within the culture. Refusal of burial, excess of ceremony, prefiguring of rites, and prolongation of the funeral journey all represent extreme cultural responses that reward further investigation.

Since the death of each actress allows for a dissection of a specific cultural preoccupation, the four actress burials examined here vary from rather than represent the norm. Usual burial practices represent the society's standard response, whereas the unusual burials I have chosen presented a particularly strong challenge to the system. Many of the conflicts noted occur over and over again in actress funerals, but the extreme nature of these four burials makes cultural frictions more evident. These are four points on a continuum, for every burial can be read for cultural significance.

In my first chapter, I focus on the institution of the church in eighteenth-century France. In 1730 representatives of the Catholic church refused to inter Adrienne Lecouvreur (1692–1730) in holy or unholy ground, and her corpse was left in a shallow unmarked ditch. Biographers agree that the church denied her burial because of her profession, but the extreme measures taken to keep her burial place unknown and the shock felt by the Parisian artistic community are documented rather than analyzed. This simplified version of events completes Lecouvreur's portrait but not the picture of her society.

In fact, the factors that led to Lecouvreur's funereal erasure started centuries earlier, and the events following her death reverberated in the centuries to come. Although her fate could be interpreted as the inevitable result of the clash between her profession and a monolithic church, the anomaly of her unique interment deserves closer scrutiny. Gender intensified the already tense relationship between the theatre and the Church. The public worship at Lecouvreur's performances represented a rival power that the church wished to destroy. Unable to socially ostracize the highly visible actress during her life, the church destroyed her body and withheld the customary

commemoration. In the emotionally charged space following Lecouvreur's death, the church loosed its anger at women in the theatre.

In contrast, chapter two looks at how the burial of Anne Oldfield (1683–1730) in Westminster Abbey highlighted English class conflict. Her burial represented the assertion of class prerogatives after the Commonwealth at the same time as it confirmed major social changes. The attempts of the Whigs to retain power amid the incursions of the prosperous middle class oddly enough became embodied in the corpse of a former barmaid, representative of a new class of women theatre professionals. Socially ambiguous, actresses functioned as both talented performers and trophy mistresses. Anne Oldfield doubly displaced past prohibitions against actresses and kept women, confirming in her interment a new set of standards and a public forgetting of previous practices. Roach found an associative commemorative purpose for society in Betterton's burial in Westminster Abbey. Anne Oldfield's burial, close in time and place to Betterton's, challenged hierarchical assumptions that no longer met cultural needs.

By the twentieth century, elaborate obsequies for actresses were no longer an aberration but almost routine. Chapter three examines the case of Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) and the contestation of her public image. A tremendous outpouring of emotion marked the passing of this actress who actively rehearsed lying in state, posing for a photograph in the coffin that traveled with her as she toured. As she blurred the distinction between her living and her dead self, so she similarly obscured the line between her public and private selves. For the press much of this confusion centered on the performer who represented the ideal woman, and the person who did not. In her career Bernhardt played both the submissive ideal of nineteenth-century womanhood and its converse, the *femme fatale*. Bernhardt's performances prompted panegyrics; her behavior caused hostility and alarm.

The photograph of Bernhardt in her coffin thus presented a desirable vision of this ambiguous and possibly threatening figure contained. As her onstage deaths assuaged femme fatale fears, so her grand funeral procession and burial merged real and fictional roles forever.

In chapter four, Eleonora Duse (1858–1924) embodies another struggle, one perhaps more connected to the twentieth century than the contestations previously mentioned. Duse took advantage of the increased speed of industrial age travel to tour extensively and build an international reputation. She and Bernhardt became rivals on the world stage, with critics from Europe and the United States contrasting their performing styles.

Despite or because of international renown, Duse and Bernhardt both publicly identified themselves as patriots of their countries of origin. Some French felt suspicions of the cultural identity of the Jewish Bernhardt, but the Italians voiced no such reservations about Duse, whose work during World War I on behalf of Italian soldiers and romantic relationship with soldier/politician/writer Gabriele d'Annunzio brought her increased national fame. Along with her championing of Italian playwrights, these activities made her a symbol to the Italian people of Italian spirit and cultural excellence.

Duse's tour of the United States became a final farewell in Pittsburgh when she succumbed to pneumonia. In her passing she left the problem of how to properly honor and acknowledge an international star who also served as a national symbol. Mussolini intervened to ensure that this Italian heart would rest in Italian soil and created a posthumous farewell tour that included several weeks of travel and four funerals. The actress body became an emblem.

This dissertation will show that actress burials provide a site where cultural institutions contest which values will predominate. The burials of these four actresses display many different aspects of a central problem: how does society respond to the

removal of the disruptive influence of the actress? Not only do their burials reveal whether society (or a controlling part of it) considers actresses attractive nuisances or popular idols, seductive evils or precious relics; it also shows the social friction generated by the contact of women and theatre.

This work also provides a model that future studies may use to diagnose cultural pathologies erupting in other parts of the social body. Starting with the focal points of church, social mobility, media, image, and nationalism, I hope to trace the almost infinitely complex intertwining of cultural tensions found at this juncture of gender, profession, and death. The pathologies/institutional conflicts, significant in themselves, may also guide discovery and interpretation of similar phenomena.

Another significance of this work is its comparisons to the historic burials that parallel actress burials. The reactions to actress death are most comparable to those that accompanied the interments of powerful rulers, events recognized as outbreaks of the body politic. Burials indicate the importance of the deceased to their society. The similarities between actress burials and those of rulers show the historic importance of actresses. The fate of Lecouvreur and Oldfield may be found combined in Oliver Cromwell whose body successively underwent the most honorable and the most ignominious of mortuary fates.

Comparing the extreme reactions that followed the deaths of actresses to the reactions to the deaths of rulers provides insights into the cultural meaning of these events. Just as burial rituals for rulers occur during a transitional period and demonstrate the cultural anxiety of the passing of the old order and the start of a new regime, so the mourning for an actress may encapsulate the tensions and anxieties of a changing society, reminded of its mutability by the mortality of a popular icon.

Actress burials also make a contribution to the vexing matter of identity. In the wake of post-modernist relativity and the continuing debate over identity politics, the question of how to read these burials poses a problem of both theoretical and historical



methods. Confronting the impossibility of separating a person's life from its cultural context involves disentangling the socially imposed meanings with identity claims. This study will attempt to show how the constant undercurrents of social mores and theatrical practices interact with the highly volatile fame of the actress to create the varying identities revealed in the actress burial.

A final significance of this work concerns how it addresses the specifics of several actual burials and interprets them through the mediation of cultural institutions. Whether actresses depart in a blaze of ritual glory or quietly reach unmarked graves, theatre historians should note the implications of their burials and recover deaths as well as lives. Actresses buried in obscurity (in either sense) may be theoretically unearthed by an understanding of why some of their contemporaries strove to erase them. Honors given actresses may prove to have been tributes not simply to their talents but to their cultural surrogate function; their representation of something lost or longed for by the society.

Theatre history has failed to record the full significance of actress burial, and society has often failed to provide actresses with burials that meet its own standards. This study will contribute to theatre history by highlighting the causes of the latter occurrence, but it will not attempt to redress every lapse of analysis or ritual for all actresses. Others may list a comprehensive catalogue of actress interments. I am content to mark actress burials as an important site in historical investigation and begin to unearth the cultural disruptions they represent. The punishment of the rumored blasphemy of Lecouvreur; the elevation of the politically glorified Oldfield; the final picture of Bernhardt in the public eye; and the extended homecoming of Duse's Italian heart: all represented institutional priorities at least as well as they represented the actress.

At once marginalized and centerstage, the actress's precarious position in a sometimes hostile and overwhelmingly patriarchal culture contrasts sharply with the

adulation often offered in tribute to the actress body. Complex contestations triggered by gender and profession surface in the disturbed environment of the performance of the final ritual. The persistent afterglow, the legend of a star, convincingly illuminate gender and other constructed identities not as a side issue, but as a central element in the continuous cultural process which even death cannot end.

## Chapter One: Adrienne Lecouvreur's Disputed Rites

Late one night in 1730 three men carried the body of a dead woman to the bank of the Seine and hastily interred the corpse between layers of quicklime. These men were not murderers. They were following a police directive to dispose of the body of celebrated actress Adrienne Lecouvreur. Although no criminal against the laws of the state, Lecouvreur had offended the church and disrupted the civic structure. Her sin? She died an actress.

Upon examination, this clandestine burial offers an unprecedented revelation of the cultural operations at work in eighteenth-century France. This burial moment both culminated and continued a struggle between the theatre and the church, a struggle which also implicated the existing government and those who thought to improve it. Lecouvreur became the center of this struggle as an actress and as an individual. As an actress Lecouvreur represented values antithetical to church doctrine and, more importantly, to church practice. As an individual, her exceptional talent and notorious personal life heightened her offense. As actress and as individual, she disturbed the perception of her profession and challenged the church's control of the social order.

This chapter will examine the ways in which Lecouvreur transgressed the boundaries; why the church chose destruction of her body (and the state agreed to carry out the edict) as the most effective response; and why the royalty, nobility and the theatre professionals with whom she allied herself failed to rescue her body. Significantly, only the intelligentsia protested her lack of burial. The voices that objected to the disappearance of Lecouvreur asserted the rights and dignity of the individual, a rebellious idea that would lead to revolution, intellectual and otherwise. For Voltaire, the most notable of the objectors, Lecouvreur's narrative became a defining moment that encapsulated oppressive social attitudes, especially the intolerance of the church. Voltaire would return to the matter again and again in questioning the values and practices of his society. Thus, studying Lecouvreur's burial moment as a site of

disturbance both illuminates the theatre history of the period and reveals new aspects of the cultural struggle in France that presaged radical social upheaval and the coming of the Enlightenment.

The cultural institutions and groups engaged in the contestation over the narrative of Lecouvreur's death included the church, the crown, the nobility, and the philosophes (intelligentsia). Lecouvreur's talent and adeptness at alliances set her apart from other actresses of her time. She frequented the salons that nurtured the philosophes and even established her own intellectual gathering place (Durant 327). As a woman of lower class origins in eighteenth-century France, Lecouvreur could not rely on any rights being freely granted to her. Instead, she created a complex net of patrons that included the intelligentsia, the nobility, and the king to establish herself financially and support her career in a society hostile to social mobility. Yet within these constraints she made remarkably bold decisions, basing her actions on what she deemed right for her rather than on what society expected of her. This rebellion against her society, particularly the tyranny of the church, became visible through her fame and in her death.

At the time Adrienne Lecouvreur became an actress, boundary crossing came with the territory. Born in Paris, she earned a living in the provincial theatre while trysting with upper-class men. Once Lecouvreur went on the stage, affairs with the nobility became more likely than not. In eighteenth-century French theatre, the stage often served as a display of women for hire. Historically, actresses shared a common dressing room with actors and lacked any protection from so-called admirers who might wish for their favors. Men denied access to the actresses became unruly audience members, disrupting performances (Gilder 98). Until 1759, audience members could even sit on the stage, close enough to touch (which they sometimes did) and flirt with the actresses (Mittman 29). The right of the spectators to the actress body superseded the rights of the actress.

If Lecouvreur's profession exposed her to a greater number of lewd advances than non-professional women received, at least she could assume that the monetary offers came from those with the means to fulfill them. In the early eighteenth century, regulations kept the theatre an exclusive club for the upper classes from which the plebian elements were excluded. Audiences, therefore, were essentially homogenous groups of the privileged (Lough 206). Seating locations within the theatre allowed the upper classes to establish subtle differences among themselves and assert their own social standing in this relatively restricted group. A seat on the stage meant privileged visibility where gentlemen with newly purchased titles could display themselves and their new status while ogling the actresses (Mittman 31). To get to these seats the spectators passed through the foyers where the performers sat offstage, thus giving them even more opportunities for propositioning the actresses.

Under these circumstances, whether or not Lecouvreur accepted the offers, anyone who knew her profession would make assumptions about her sexual morals and develop some degree of bias against her. Her occupation gendered her as a sexually accessible female. In fact, antitheatrical prejudice coded all theatre performers as female in their accessibility, lax in their morals, and subservient to the audience. Not just prejudice but social codes contributed to the lowly status of actors, for, in addition to the sexual stigma, actors were usually the social inferiors of the spectators. Theatre's marginal position meant that it recruited its practitioners from the lower classes, and Lenard R. Berlanstein notes that up to one half of the women in the profession were born out of wedlock (162). Low birth and poverty, even more than profession, placed Lecouvreur completely outside the social limits of genteel society.

In the social circles of the audience, most women became counters for wealth or lands, given in marriage for profit and social advantage. Actresses like Lecouvreur could not serve this function because their profession and birth debarred any but the most unofficial unions. But actresses still became commodities because the possession

of a woman publicly approved as attractive enhanced the owner's prestige. As Gayle Rubin points out, the traffic in women underlies the structure of a strict, fixed, and inflexible patriarchal society.

Naturally, actresses of beauty and charm often supplemented the precarious living earned onstage with such liaisons. Lecouvreur merely did the expected in accepting the protection and gifts of one or more of her admirers. After all, social laws and church decrees combined to keep actresses from taking advantage of the most effective means of advancement for women at the time, marriage to a man of higher station.

Less expected, in view of her lack of birth and dowry, were Lecouvreur's early hopes of turning her liaisons into traditional marriages. Although later in life she deplored the impositions of social success, in her early years she hoped for the stability of legalized social advancement. In 1712 she wrote and suggested marriage to an admirer and former lover Clavel. Several years later Count François de Klinglin promised to marry her. Her pregnancy with his child revealed the situation to his family who persuaded him to abandon her (Richtman 47). Her failure to gain the high ground of marital respectability may have influenced her determination to become a success in the liminal world of the theatre.

When Lecouvreur returned to Paris with two daughters and no husband in 1717, she joined the Comédie-Française. Legally this made Louis XV her protector and employer. All the performers at the three Paris theatres became "king's performers" when they began their employment at the Opéra, Comédie-Italienne, or Comédie-Française. This meant they officially lost any family connections or civil status. Instead, they became part of the royal household, servants of the court. The court included not only the king but the nobility who comprised it and acted on behalf of the king. In the case of the Comédie-Française, the Gentlemen of the Bedchamber regulated the actors and determined what rules they must follow (Berlanstein 161). In 1712 the

Gentlemen issued a comprehensive decree determining behavior, assignment of roles, and attendance at rehearsals (Lancaster 24). In a very literal sense these aristocrats controlled the living bodies of performers.

While Lecouvreur most likely accepted these conditions without much conscious thought about her bargain, she expected compensation and protection in return. The King and the nobles co-opted the performers as highly regulated entertainers, and their aegis offered protection against the civil authorities who might otherwise treat performers as suspect. When exposed as an individual actress, Lecouvreur could expect attack; when merged into this royally sanctioned group Lecouvreur received a measure of protection. The actress body had value in an entertainment economy (which included sex) established by the court and the aristocracy. The value of the actress body was not recognized, however, by canonical law.

To understand the extreme nature of the posthumous attack on Lecouvreur as an individual we must recognize the place of actresses historically and how Lecouvreur tapped into these anxieties. The complicated history of discrimination against actresses includes the Roman law, that specifically classed actresses with prostitutes, forbidding the marriage of either with Roman citizens. Civil law in France did not replicate these statutes, and laws concerning vagabonds did not apply to the servants of the crown. Instead, strictures against performers, particularly actresses, issued from the Catholic church of France.

For Lecouvreur the demands of church and state conflicted and stood in clear contrast to each other, since one required her not to perform while the other employed her to do so. Yet those not involved in theatre (the majority of the French populace) had no reason to choose between church and state or to notice any division between them. The government and the church remained closely aligned in a relationship of highly visible mutual support and covert contestation that used such institutions as the theatre to test and extend their influence.

Both church and state rested on foundations of time-honored practices and laws, with the most restrictive affecting those of the lowest social class. Yet while French curtailment of individual liberties was not limited to church actions, the French Catholic church treated performers, especially actresses with unusual severity. The church based its practices on the decrees passed by the Christian church in the early medieval period when writings and rulings, such as the decretum of Gratian and the councils of Carthage (Chambers 12), specifically legislated against those who married actresses. Actresses could not act in Rome until 1798. Live Hov points out that to date no one has found the original prohibition from the church, since the Sixtine edict (1588) that many sources cite specifically forbids women spectators rather than performers. Yet prohibition(s) there must have been, for elsewhere in Italy women played the parts taken in Rome by disguised men. Hov mentions the usual reasons for this clerical prejudice against actresses—distrust of theatre in general and women in particular as seductive temptresses, and a conflation of actresses with prostitutes (Hov 63–69).

But the discrimination of Lecouvreur's time was not the inevitable result of the centuries of antitheatrical prejudice in the church. The active hostility between church and theatre that dated back to ancient Rome had eased as theatre decreased the licentiousness common to the mime tradition and its audiences increased in respectability. Royal patronage also helped ensure a certain level of toleration. Instead the French Catholic attack on performers' rights occurred because of renewed hostility toward the theatre ignited by *Tartuffe*, and the clergy developed a level of antitheatrical prejudice unequalled in Europe (certainly not in Spain, where theatre retained its ties to religion, or England, where the religion itself had changed). Long suspicious of the secular drama that, even in medieval farce, exploited the foibles of religious men for comic effect, fierce opposition flared when *Tartuffe* (1669) publicly demonstrated that religion might be enacted without sincerity. This contrasted with a more relaxed attitude at the Vatican, which tolerated actors, though actresses could not perform in Rome. By



the time Lecouvreur began performing, the French church's attempt to exercise authority over living actors had become a policy of stern disapproval that drastically curtailed performers' individual liberties .

First produced in 1664, *Tartuffe* openly opposed the power of the theatre to the power of the church. Its performance started a five year struggle that pitted Molière against the Archbishop of Paris in a contest for the favor of the King. While officially banned from the public stage, *Tartuffe* became a popular entertainment at the homes of the nobility who lobbied for royal approval. The Compagnie du Saint-Sacrament used its influence with Anne of Austria to prevent public performances for years (Lancaster 7), but eventually the third version of the play received the royal license in 1669 and became an overwhelming success (Palmer 346). Suddenly, the Parisian clergy required actors to conform to church rules previously neglected. In 1671 when the dying tragedian Floridor sent for a priest to give him absolution, the curé refused until the actor promised to never act again (Williams 70). Henceforward, Parisian actors had to renounce their profession before death to obtain Christian burial.

When Molière himself died in 1673, the priests of his parish did not arrive till after his death. No renunciation meant no burial for him in holy ground. His wife complained that the priests deliberately stayed away, and the king, for once, interfered. The Archbishop decreed a nighttime funeral. Later an old chaplain asserted that Molière's body rested not in its official tomb but in a non-consecrated part of the cemetery (Fernandez 247). Almost certainly the bones later transferred to Père Lachaise were not his (Palmer 484).

Under these conditions, every actor death became an opportunity for the church to assert its power, with the destruction of Lecouvreur's body as the most dramatic instance. The postmortem fate of the acting suppliant depended on the attitude of the clergy who came to the deathbed and the rulings of the Archbishop of Paris. Thus the expulsion from the church came directly from the local level, with parishes outside Paris

varying in their attitude. The Vatican left discipline to France, while mentioning that only actors who participated in lewd spectacles should be penalized (Mongrédien 25). The Parisian priests themselves were astoundingly inconsistent in their application of the ban, for the Italian players received the full sacraments of the church in Paris, and the performers at the Opéra were also exempted. The former group benefited from a perceived Papal indulgence, and the Opéra performers supposedly did not count as actors, although the canon laws which the clergy claimed to follow made no such distinctions. The church targeted the Comédie-Française, "the house of Molière" for excommunication, and the actors suffered for Molière's challenge of the church's power.

In 1696 French actors appealed directly to Pope Innocent XII, but his council advised against any interference with the Gallican church (Mongrédien 25). The Pope allowed the French Catholics a measure of independence out of fear that otherwise they would break with the church of Rome altogether. This assertion of rights separated the church of France from that of Rome, which pleased a monarchy ever alert for encroachment on its prerogatives by outside forces. The kings of France were complicit in the French clergy's enforcement of antiperformer strictures and chose not to contest the decisions of French priests, although the kings also continued to patronize actors.

So Lecouvreur gave her contractual allegiance to the king and accepted the automatic excommunication that went with her employment. Her acceptance of these conditions did not necessarily mean that she did not profess Catholicism. She was known for her charitable works, and several accounts mention a proposed gift to the poor through her local priest (Rivollet 114, Monval 65). As with anyone who violated the church's precepts, Lecouvreur could confess and repent.

In the special case of actors, repentance became a visible symbol of the church's control over the social as well as the material body. Foucault describes the phenomenon of the social body as "the effect of the materiality of power operating on

the very bodies of individuals" (*Power/Knowledge* 56). While he dates concentration on the social body to the nineteenth century (when it replaced the monarch's body as a locus of social cohesion), seventeenth and eighteenth-century priests operated through the same systems of segregation and exclusion which Foucault notes as figuring in the restoration of the integrity of the social body. Since performers challenged that integrity, the special guidelines the Parisian clergy established for them attempted to nullify the threat of actors' past performances by scripting the deathbed scenes. When Brécourt of the Comédie-Française renounced his profession, the priest insisted that Brécourt put it in writing. This extra step allowed the new narrative to be widely circulated. The deed read in part: "having formerly followed the profession of an actor, he renounces it, and promises, with a true and sincere heart, to exercise it no more, even if restored to full and complete health" (quoted in Williams 118).

Such a statement served as an *amende honorable* to the Church, similar in type to the *amende honorable* that Foucault describes a condemned man making before his execution (66). Like the often fictionalized last words of the condemned, the actor's renunciation came from the agency administering her or his fate. When the curtain fell on the individual, the clergy could display the renunciation as an epilogue that reversed the meaning of the performance. In place of an actor secure in fortune and the plaudits of the public, the clergy presented a confessed sinner acknowledging the superiority and necessity of the Church's rituals to anything found in the theatre. The Church could use this rewriting as an effective surrogation for the life that challenged its authority.

Not all acting bodies accepted this rewriting with good grace. In 1698 the actress Marie de Champmeslé of the Comédie-Française, famous for creating the roles of Racine, resisted renouncing her profession. Like Lecouvreur, in her last illness she still maintained a narrative that contested the church's authority. In Champmeslé's case, she did so deliberately, believing that the clergy unfairly condemned her profession. Her pride in her profession and individual stubbornness nearly exiled her body from holy

ground. But unlike Lecouvreur, she publicly reconciled with the church in her final moments. Champmeslé was at the point of death when she agreed to renounce the theatre. It was too late for a notarized statement, but the curé agreed to accept a verbal statement and gave her absolution.

Lecouvreur could have planned on making such a deathbed repentance herself, thus avoiding the spiritual jeopardy the church forecast for those in her profession. A highly publicized repentance narrative sufficed to absolve Brécourt and Champmeslé and obtained catholic burial for them. These deathbed repentances allowed the church to shun actresses and bury them, too. In asking for a renunciation, the priest showed their opposition to the theatre by keeping the bodies of actresses out of its holy ground. The process of renunciation expunged the actress from the now sanctified body, and through this rite the actress ceased to be before the body ceased to breathe. Nominally therefore, no actresses profaned sacred space.

An actress, and thus already profane, Lecouvreur also frequented the literary salons of Paris, from which would come a new challenge to the church, the philosophes of the Enlightenment (Goodman 6). Her much publicized extramarital alliance with Maurice de Saxe completed this oppositional configuration and made a clerical reckoning inevitable. When the actor Legrand heralded Lecouvreur to the Paris theatre as a new Champmeslé, he meant the comparison as a tribute to her acting, though it also predicted her struggle with the church.

Lecouvreur's talent soon justified Legrand's comparison. Many thought her remarkable career marked a new epoch in French acting. Along with Baron, her cohort at the Comédie-Française, she became renowned for a natural style of acting (Richtman 73). Known for her natural and unaffected delivery, Lecouvreur presented a marked contrast to her most notable theatrical rival, Mlle. Duclos. Lecouvreur spoke rather than declaimed. In one of her letters she insisted that she never declaimed, and claimed the simplicity of her acting as its only merit (Monval 179). Simplicity and

honesty in the service of the theatre presented a dangerous contradiction. The more convincing the theatre's presentations, the greater its persuasive power, the more it threatened the rival attraction of the church for the devotion of its spectators. Since the church accounted acting deceptive and evil, a talent that made it seem honest and open caused more alarm than all Duclos's bombast. An acting style that showed no deception could be accounted the greatest deception of all. In the terms of antitheatrical prejudice, Lecouvreur made sin attractive.

From the antitheatrical viewpoint, Lecouvreur's skill meant she openly deceived men more effectively than less talented actresses. Theatre and its practitioners often imitate life, and critics from Plato onward sometimes equate this imitation with an organized system of lies. This makes theatre a suspect institution. In fixedly patriarchal societies, when theatre also brings women into the public eye, the intrusion of women into the public sphere marks a possible breach in a patriarchal structure. The institutions react to eliminate or contain the disruption. As Kristina Straub notes in *Sexual Suspects*, in the struggle for authority an effective strategy of the power structure is to characterize the actor/actress as outcast. In Lecouvreur's case, the institution of the church reacted and created or adapted its rituals to cast out the actress body and deprive it of signifying power.

Lecouvreur's talent angered Parisian clerics for another reason, since her skill not only increased her own popularity but that of the theatre as a diversion. Several writers defending the theatre at this time implied that the Jesuits objected to the competition from the theatre and wished for better attendance at their own performances (Barish 204). In 1694 Bossuet made the jealousy motivation for the increase in strictures on performers abundantly clear when he wrote that the Church would excommunicate all theatregoers were their numbers not so great (Palmer 119). He particularly condemned the profession of actress, lamenting that Christian girls should be dedicated to public unchastity and exposed as slaves for sale (Mongrédien

24). The Parisian clergy's demand that actors and actresses renounce their profession emanated in part from a not-so-hidden desire to eliminate theatre entirely. The popularity of actresses threatened the church and their own eternal salvation. Lecouvreur's worldly fame could only hinder her journey to the kingdom of heaven.

At a time when birth strictly defined social station, Lecouvreur also threatened the stability of cultural institutions with her desire and ability to mimic the manners of those above her in rank. Offstage, Lecouvreur seemingly retained the characteristics of refinement and sensibility that ornamented the queens she portrayed. The neoclassical theatre of Racine and Corneille eschewed heroines of low degree and favored queens and princesses, so inevitably Lecouvreur's person and voice became publicly associated with characters of the highest birth. She encouraged this perception early in her career with the adding the particle "Le" to her name, a form of nomenclature used by the nobility (Rivollet 4). When Adrienne Couvreur became Adrienne Lecouvreur she made a strong statement about herself and what she wanted. Although unable to marry into the ranks of the nobility, she allied herself to them in every other possible way.

As with marriage, the nobility demarcated the limits of this association, and Lecouvreur could not transgress the boundaries without assistance. As with her attempts at marriage, others ultimately decided to what degree she would be accepted. Unlike guests of equal rank, Lecouvreur might be asked to recite a speech from one of her roles. When the nobility invited Lecouvreur to their homes, they maintained the distinction of rank, reserving the right to treat her as guest or as performer as circumstances should warrant.

In Lecouvreur's era, actresses could mingle socially with the highest ranks of society in France. This infiltration added to the alarm felt by the French clergy over the influence of the theatre on the most socially important members of their congregation. Yet performers and aristocrats did not meet on an equal footing. The nobility enjoyed their company but treated them as social inferiors, even servants, and actresses could

not expect the respect (especially any gentlemanly restraint in sexual advances) afforded a lady. Starting in the Regency period (1715–1718) the aristocratic lifestyle that became known as *la vie galante* added spice to the now open competition for the favors of female performers (Berlanstein 162). Women in the professions of dancer, singer and actress all attracted pursuers with few concerns about discretion or preserving the women's reputations. The thoughtlessness of their importuners probably had more to do with their lack of respectable ancestors than it did with their professions. Yet the public nature of their work certainly put these women in a different category as highly visible prizes. As mentioned earlier, actresses had value as status-conferring trophies.

In these circumstances, social invitations became as much of a burden as a privilege for Lecouvreur, since such invitations equaled commands to someone in her position. Some of the nobility she considered her friends, such as the Marquise de Lambert whose illustrious salon attracted the greatest intellects of the day. In her letters Lecouvreur differentiates between old friends like the Marquise and those who invited her or came to see her because she was in fashion (Monval 168). Her own salon also attracted many notables (Durant 327). Often ill, she could not refuse an invitation without being accused of playing the great lady. She wrote that she had to meet anyone who asked and attend wherever invited or be charged with impertinence (Monval 169). Her great charm made her a prized guest, but her social standing remained below those who demanded her presence without any concern for her health or convenience.

While Lecouvreur's refinement let her taste the delights and endure the slights of high society, it also added another mark against her in the church. An actress's charm might endear her to the laity, but it increased clerical distrust. Jonas Barish notes that Christian fathers as far back as Tertullian voiced a recurring combination of prejudices in their invectives linking women and theatre and condemning both for their attractiveness and artifice (50). These prejudices sometimes became articles of belief

for the church. Describing the seventeenth-century French clergy's antitheatrical attacks, Barish states that proponents of antitheatricalism use argument not to search for truth but to force their fervent beliefs on others (205).

Barish finds the French clergy's antitheatrical stance in the seventeenth century more overtly misogynistic than that of the English at the same period; this was due to the French clergy's claim that women were more emotional and susceptible to the negative influence of theatre, unfitting them for the traditional roles of wife and mother. Again, women become connected to theatre as sources of evil because they are sources of pleasure and beauty, delights men should look for only in heaven. Nothing can improve the theatre; the only possible solution to the problem it presents is a total suppression of this distraction from holiness (203). In sum, the better Lecouvreur pleased her patrons, the worse the church thought her.

Lecouvreur excelled the other actresses of her time in acting and socializing, yet these activities were expected of all actresses. Although her preeminence doubtless exacerbated clerical distrust and dislike, a further circumstance made her narrative an unusually unsettling one to the church. This fascinating romantic story that set her apart also made her a target for clerical retribution, for it epitomized the social and moral boundary crossing that the church most feared. Lecouvreur's acting made her famous, and her personality made her sought after, but her affair with Maurice, Comte de Saxe made her legendary.

A famous soldier and the illegitimate son of the King of Poland and a Swedish noblewoman, Maurice de Saxe also became known for the number and quality of his lovers. When Lecouvreur and de Saxe met in 1720, both felt the other represented a fit object of devotion (Rivollet 91). In storybook parlance, the brave soldier fell in love with the pretty actress. Or, bearing in mind the social order of the time, the talented and beautiful actress devoted herself to the brave and well-born soldier, and he allowed her to do so.



Lecouvreur's relationship with de Saxe disturbed the social order and challenged the historical church doctrine forbidding relationships with actresses. It also created a romantic narrative as appealing to the French people in general as it was repugnant to the Parisian clergy in particular. Lecouvreur's choice of an irregular liaison with the noble Marshal de Saxe, over the legal unions available to her (marriage with an actor being the most likely), again demonstrated Lecouvreur's preference for the nobility and an approximation of their way of life. Given the social framework, Lecouvreur could not expect fidelity from de Saxe because the culture would not recognize her claim on him. Instead, she relied on an alternative narrative, a narrative of passion (shown in her letters to him) to structure their relationship. Narrative romances of mismatched lovers usually victimize their heroines, a victimization Lecouvreur seemed willing to endure to be with de Saxe. The typical climax to the narrative of ill-assorted love, untimely death with overtones of violence, also waited in the wings.

The more compelling this romantic story became, the more it impinged on the public consciousness, and the more significant and destabilizing the narrative became for a church that wanted to contain, rewrite, and nullify the actress's life through the control of the actress. Lecouvreur's love story enhanced her unacceptable fame and highlighted the visibility of actress sexuality. When the duchesse de Bouillon became a rival for de Saxe's love, the plot thickened into an operatic melodrama irresistible to future dramatists. In 1729 the Abbé Bouret warned Lecouvreur that the duchesse de Bouillon wished to poison her. Neither the police nor Maurice de Saxe believed Bouret's story.

Lecouvreur gave Bouret enough credence to react. The public forum in which she chose to respond to Bouret's accusation made this relationship even more highly visible, thereby enriching and publicizing the narrative. On at least two occasions, Adrienne Lecouvreur deliberately allowed a theatre audience to witness episodes from this love affair.

In the first instance Lecouvreur hurled a stage sword at Maurice while performing *Phèdre*, presumably in reproach at his infidelity. At a subsequent performance of the play, Lecouvreur pointedly directed her lines about shameless female criminals to the duchesse. The audience, well aware of the story, applauded wildly (Richtman 165). The reported reaction of the theatre audience in the second instance indicates that they knew the details of Lecouvreur's private life. If so, Lecouvreur's actions could have been staged as much for the audience as for de Saxe and de Bouillon. Although not entitled by law or social custom to expect de Saxe's fidelity, Lecouvreur worked in an imaginary world that put love above all else. This gave her the opportunity to enlist public sympathy that might otherwise have eluded her. Adding the subtext of her troubled romance to the play connected her affair with the romances of the theatre in the popular imagination. Lecouvreur took advantage of the only arena she controlled to shame the socially powerful couple.

However consciously Lecouvreur created a narrative of passionate love, and however much it appealed to the popular imagination, the story aggravated her division from the church. The narrative emphasized all that the church found most objectionable: her fame, her public womanhood (linked openly with her sexuality), and her extramarital relationship.

Soon after these events, Adrienne Lecouvreur became ill and died. Instead of the priest who never came, she had Voltaire and possibly de Saxe at her bedside (Monval 61). She died as she had lived, linked with the worlds of theatre and noble (though illicit) love. During Adrienne Lecouvreur's final illness, a summons sent to Saint-Sulpice for a confessor resulted in the arrival of Languet de Gergy, reputedly a bigoted and stubborn priest. He reportedly asked the Comédie-Française actress to repent of her profession and sign a document renouncing the theatre; Lecouvreur supposedly responded by summoning her last remaining strength, and gesturing to a bust of her

lover, Maurice de Saxe, and exclaimed, "There are my universe, my hope, and my gods!" (Richtman 175).

This incident cannot be confirmed. Maurice may have stayed at Adrienne's bedside till the end, which would make her appeal to his sculptured likeness unlikely. She may even have died before the priest's arrival (Monval 61). Nor do her few surviving writings support the idea of defiant resistance to religion. In her last testament she asks for God's mercy, "Je comande mon âme a Dieu et je le suplie de me faire miséricorde" (Monval 231). Biographer Louis Truc adduces this pious beginning to her will as proof of his assertion that she would have made any renunciation asked of her (110). Rivollet also believes that her last testament shows she intended to die as a Christian, though he reports the legend of the deathbed scene in full and regrets that her own writing contradicts such a theatrically beautiful story (114–115). Monval footnotes an anecdote from *Tableau du Siècle* that holds that Lecouvreur intended to give a valuable necklace to the priest for his parish and that the priest only found this out after her burial. In this story, the priest's response fits in perfectly with the narrow-minded venal attitude rejected in the Enlightenment: (in loose translation) "Why didn't someone tell me this before we put quicklime on her body?" (Monval 65).

So Lecouvreur's rejection of the church rests on inconsistent and weak documentation. But the truth of the story did not matter, for the legend that she idolized de Saxe instead of God perfectly captures the opposition of the romantic heroine and the crusading clergy, bound in a conflict necessary to two very different performances of French eighteenth-century society.

The clergy mobilized to meet the threat of this narrative with an interpretation of the canon laws to accommodate their own prejudices. Church law served as an excuse to exclude Lecouvreur in irrevocable excommunication. The reason for the startlingly total destruction of Lecouvreur's mortal remains came from something other than

historical precedent. If theatre and especially the actress threatened the power of the church, the actress body, at least, could be destroyed.

At the urging of Voltaire, de Saxe ordered an autopsy performed on the actress that revealed she succumbed to a chronic inflammation and not a poisoned bouquet sent by the duchesse (Truc 109). This finding did not prevent rumor or later romancers like Scribe and Bernhardt from repeating the more melodramatic explanation in dramatic form.

Because of the absence of a priest and the unusual circumstances of the death, the authorities needed instructions as to what to do next. Since the church controlled the cemeteries and regulated funeral services, it became the privilege of the church to determine what would happen to Lecouvreur's remains. Clearly, de Saxe (representing the nobility) and Voltaire (representing both the theatre and the philosophes) wished for an honorable interment. But though these forces could promote an actress's career, neither nobility nor theatre could influence the fate of her corpse, and, as a philosophe, Voltaire found protest after the fact his only recourse. Government and religion determined the matter as Interior Minister Maurepas consulted with Cardinal de Fleury as to the disposal of the body. Fleury, in turn, deferred to the wishes of the Archbishop of Paris and the priests of St. Sulpice (Adrienne's parish). Since they refused Lecouvreur a burial place, the decision was made to remove the body by night and dispose of it with the least amount of scandal possible (Richtman 177). Between them, the church and the government arranged for the quicklime burial that night, a move meant to give the church a final and lasting victory in their contestation against the theatre and nobility's patronage of it. The clergy attempted to dispose of any idea of individual rights along with the actress body.

Since, according to rumor, Adrienne died without renouncing the theatre, she was not entitled to be buried in holy ground. But instead of interring Lecouvreur in the unsanctified portion of the cemetery (with still-born babies and others not admitted to

the church), the men smuggled her corpse to the river. Why did the usual symbolic banishment not suffice? What did this particular body symbolize that was so dangerous that it had to be permanently disposed of as quickly and as anonymously as possible?

Lecouvreur's body became the focus of extraordinary retribution not because of a unique offense, but because Lecouvreur conspicuously exemplified an individual who aspired to live outside the norms. The success of her aspirations came with a loosening of social restrictions. Since Lecouvreur died without a public repentance, the institutions challenged by her dissent felt the need to eliminate any display or commemoration of the actress body. The unique circumstances of eighteenth-century prerevolutionary France helped determine institutional reaction, as the institutional narratives increasingly came under attack from individuals who declared their independence from the traditional social divisions and corresponding allegiances.

Religion, the institution that reacted most strongly to the theatrical threat, faced much dissent at this time. Even religious disputes that seemed settled seethed beneath the surface of everyday life. In the sixteenth century active hostilities with the Huguenots (French Protestants) had resulted in a bloody civil war that still troubled the French in the eighteenth century. When Voltaire wrote about this violent period (in *La Henriade*) the work itself became the center of renewed conflict, as the Huguenots promoted its message of antifanaticism and tolerance (Adams 50). Voltaire's individual protests against church and government practices became a pivotal feature in the aftermath of Lecouvreur's disintegration.

Dissenting voices also arose within the Roman Catholic church itself when a sect known as Jansenists briefly gained power and secured partisans in the government, particularly through positions in the University of Paris, the Sorbonne. As members of the intelligentsia, they could disseminate their opinions easily through the upper class and briefly influenced even the King and Queen in the last half of the seventeenth century.

This seeming inclusion of a divergent viewpoint (one that incidentally condemned theatre even more strongly than orthodox Catholicism) ended at the beginning of the eighteenth century when Louis XIV attacked this burgeoning pluralism. As Louis XIV became more and more religious in his final years, he became particularly zealous against those he identified as the enemies of the church, which included Protestants, Jansenists, and, to a lesser extent, actors.

The King ordered Jansenist places of worship destroyed (Van Kley 16). Later, in 1715, a few months before his death, the King published an edict that called for converted Protestants who refused the final sacraments to be treated as heretics and their bodies thrown into the sewer. Legally, this edict eliminated the existence of Protestants in France. The French could not be Protestants, only Catholics or apostates (Poland 25). The close parallel to Lecouvreur's fate extends beyond the treatment of the body to the method of denial and surrogation that denied existence to the threatening other.

At the time the King eliminated the places for alternative worship, the King also withdrew his presence from the theatre. According to the Palatine Princess, writing in 1702, when the King attended plays, playgoing was no sin; a bench set aside for bishops was always full and Bossuet always came. When the King stopped going it became a sin (Mongrédien 26). Almost all the powers of the King and the clergy thus united against the theatre. The Jansenists and the Gallican clergy even agreed in this condemnation. Yet, though jeopardized by this change, French theatre survived. The King withdrew his presence but not his financial support. The royal subsidies for theatre continued. He no longer attended the performances, but the performers often came to court. The nobility provided the patronage that the King withdrew, and their appreciation and support carried the theatre through, despite this powerful opposition. The duc de Berry, the duc d'Orléans, and the duchesse de Bourgogne even acted in some

productions. The great nobles, like the princesse de Conti and the duchesse du Maine, also hired actors for private entertainments (Lancaster 6–7).

Unable to stop theatrical performances, the clergy asserted their power to determine the final fate of the performers. The church moved to silence a rival and dangerous voice through the regulation of dead and dying actors. Already distrustful of theatrical influence, *Tartuffe* confirmed the fears of church officials that theatre undermined religion. In response, the church originally convinced the court to ban *Tartuffe* and then attempted to segregate its performers from the community after death. Only royal intervention and a pious death saved Molière from an unsanctified grave in 1673, and doubt remains if the clergy interred Molière's body in his official tomb, or in an unconsecrated part of the cemetery. (Fernandez 247). In essence, the church and state agreed to stifle individual dissent by denying physical locations to suspect opinions.

This policy reached an extreme in the church refusal of any ground, sanctified or unsanctified, for Lecouvreur's burial. A burial might have provided a site for the expression of counter-culture beliefs. A precedent already existed where the gravesite of a nonconforming individual became such a locus. Perhaps the church and crown feared that a Lecouvreur grave would cause disturbances similar to those in 1727, when the tomb of the Jansenist deacon Pâris became a place where people went to cure convulsions by praying to Pâris. Many Parisians took these cures as a sign against the persecution of the Jansenists and a condemnation of Rome and the French Bishops. Trying to eliminate this site of resistance, Louis XV closed the cemetery in 1732, and, when convulsionaries kept coming, the police arrested them (Farge 23). As with Lecouvreur, the attempt to eliminate dissent by concealing/prohibiting it raised a storm of protest. And after Lecouvreur's death and nonburial, Lecouvreur and Pâris became linked together in the public mind, both viewed as persecuted innocents.

The decision to deny a sanctified and marked burial plot to Lecouvreur, to refuse a marker of her individuality, may have indicated that church and state believed that disruptive opinions needed a physical location to coalesce, and/or that dissent spread by contagion. The treatment of Lecouvreur's body matches precautions taken with diseased bodies to prevent the spread of illness (also the treatment of lepers and the mad as described by Foucault) by removing it from society. The church appealed to government agents to dispose of the corpse, since the police agreed with the clergy that ideas might be contagious and that the contagion should be stopped at the source. Lisa Jane Graham writes that at this time police officers thought of themselves as doctors fighting the "ideological infection" of antigovernment thought and independent opinions, a disease they fought by removing the outspoken (86–87) and restricting access to foci of discontent as they did in the instance of Pâris. Since the actress body threatened to become a gathering site for the expression of anti-institutional opinions, they destroyed it.

Since all theatre performers (to some extent) lived outside the regulations of the church and chose self over society, all posed a risk of a similar kind. But the other actors of Lecouvreur's time cooperated with social institutions to minimize that risk. On their deathbeds, these actors aided the church in erasing their difference and undercut the effect of their example through renunciations that confessed and proclaimed the wrongness of their actions.

Lecouvreur asserted her individuality and heightened the danger she already posed as an actress by a highly visible affair with a member of nobility, which led to an accusation against another member of the nobility. This intensified the risk she represented in three ways: the affair increased her religious culpability, it destabilized boundaries, and it brought the actions of the nobility into question. Her adulterous affair with de Saxe added another sin that the church would want her to repent publicly. The liaison also put her uncomfortably close to her social superiors, and her willingness to



act on the accusation made against the duchesse, and her effective method of doing so, gave the accusation greater credibility and circulation. She then died in the most romantic of circumstances without a public renunciation. Her death also increased the suspicions against the duchesse. The church feared Lecouvreur might prove a compelling argument for a sinful life if she were not somehow erased from the scene.

Given these circumstances, the failure of Louis XV to intercede becomes not just understandable, but inevitable. Despite Lecouvreur's popularity at court, her involvement in a love triangle with the nobility, and her public chiding of de Saxe and the Duchesse de Bouillon represented a dangerous abrogation of traditional behavior. Her friendship with the Marquise de Lambert and participation in the philosophical salons of the time also set her apart, as an individual of a new type.

For had Lecouvreur been the only person to express an individual rebellion against her position her burial might have proceeded along the usual lines. Paradoxically, Lecouvreur's individualism came as part of a wider movement. Henri-Jean Martin posits that by the end of the seventeenth century the reading public of France began to disagree with the attitudes of the established order. The wealthy differed with the guiding principles of the government and the church. These divisions increased in the eighteenth century, as even the commoners boldly disagreed with the church and government, especially in the Pâris affair. During this transitional period, the nobility and the intelligentsia felt free to disagree with both their ruler and their church—an attitude conspicuous in the reaction to the disposal of Lecouvreur. Many of the nobility actively resisted the church's antagonistic stance on the theatre. Where Parisian priests perceived an active threat to the church, the nobility saw entertainment and pleasant companions.

The two opposed attitudes coexisted temporally, but not spatially. In the theatre the actress was admired and applauded; in the church she was admonished and condemned. Theatre and church contested other social spaces, with actresses both

admired and condemned by the commoners who watched their performances and the nobility who invited them to their homes and sometimes to their beds.

Despite the lack of a general outcry at the ill treatment of Lecouvreur's body, the theatre community would repeatedly reenact the unwitnessed burial in thought and speech, as would self-identified champions of the arts in (Voltaire) and out of the theatre (Marquis de Rochemare). For those who believed talent and intellect to be more important than birth and religion, the moment spotlighted the problem within their society. Yet there was little immediate response, certainly not on the part of the excommunicated actors. When the Comédie-Française held a special assembly the next day, Voltaire called for action on the part of the performers, suggesting that they cease performing until they were granted the rights of other citizens (Monval 64). Supposedly those in attendance agreed, but no actor strike followed (Richtman 178). Voltaire later wrote the actress Mlle. Clairon that the actors had preferred a little bit of money to honor. Mlle. Clairon, who succeeded Lecouvreur as the most notable actor at the Comédie-Française, chose honor and at one point refused to perform in protest at the treatment of actors. Her subsequent five day imprisonment led Voltaire to write "C'est une contradiction trop absurde d'être au For-l'Éveque si l'on ne joue pas, et d'être excommunié si l'on joue" (178 qtd. in Kunstler). In other words, one could be excommunicated by clerical authority for acting, or imprisoned by royal authority for not acting. Voltaire characterized this situation as a ridiculous contradiction, but it well represents the struggle of two opposing powers asserting their interests. The actors asserted power in this struggle most notably by withdrawal, by refusing to perform. Mlle. Clairon retired soon after her imprisonment in disgust at the continued mistreatment of actors.

Those not closely connected with the theatre simply honored Adrienne's career and skirted the controversy by ignoring the irregularity of the proceedings. When the *Mercure de France* called for public mourning, it did not mention anything concerned

with Lecouvreur's burial (Rivollet 132). Bouret's accusation of the Duchesse de Bouillon complicated the already fraught situation, although Lecouvreur's poor health supported the finding of death by natural causes as did the autopsy. The *Mercure de France* entirely avoided the subjects of poisoning and burial, fearing such topics might offend both the church and the influential duchesse. At a time of relatively limited literacy, the press chose discretion and suppression over scandalous facts that reflected poorly on the governing elite. This reticence changed as the reading public grew more diverse, as I will show in chapter three. For now, however, the media cultivated a public oblivion to cover and dissolve conflicts, just as the church disintegrated the contested body.

Within the artistic sphere, the poets ventured to protest. Those who knew Lecouvreur from the salons and appreciated her talent and intellect voiced their anger. The Marquis de Rochemare wrote a poem ironically concluding that public belief in Lecouvreur's immortality motivated the refusal of burial. Poet René de Bonneval blamed superstition and prejudice and promised her an apotheosis. An anonymous poet compared her to the gods who need no tombs on earth (Richtman 188–190). In these tributes, the forerunners of the Enlightenment philosophes made the exclusion of the actress body an acknowledgement of its superiority to other bodies. In their narratives, church rites become an inferior form of commemoration required by bodies of lesser importance.

Voltaire did not write his famous elegy, *Sur la mort de Mlle. Lecouvreur*, until seven months after Lecouvreur's death, when the English actress Anne Oldfield was interred in Westminster Abbey. Like the anonymous poet who apotheosized Lecouvreur, Voltaire inverts the Church's view of the matter by asserting that the actress body sanctifies the profane riverbank. Voltaire also directly attacks the cruel priests who made the decision. The bitter tone of his verses mourn not only Lecouvreur but the country that failed to honor her properly. The dangerous doctrine of a woman sanctified by her artistic achievements threatened the established religious order, as did

the refusal of the actress to remain in private domesticity, unseen by the public. Voltaire's praise of her individualism formed part of his worldview, an increasingly insistent protest against the current social divisions and regulations.

Voltaire's denunciation unsettled the authorities who banned it, but it still circulated widely (Carlson 40). Voltaire's eloquent insistence upon Lecouvreur's individual dignity exacerbated the situation and further persecution of Voltaire followed. Voltaire's attempt to give Lecouvreur's story an ending of fame instead of oblivion symbolized the fierce conflict between the opposing factions. The clergy controlled the rites of dying and burial, giving the priests an opportunity to symbolically redeem or expunge those lives that represented narratives that differed from the church's position. The disruption caused by a popular actress could be transformed into repentance or contained by anonymous burial, providing a suitable ending to the story of an unsuitable life. Such at least seems to have been the theory of the clerical faction. Ironically, when the Church tried to erase Lecouvreur at the time of death, the poets repeatedly constructed visibility for the actress body.

Lecouvreur's martyred body continued to influence Voltaire in his work (there is a reference to it in *Candide*) and in his philosophy in general. Voltaire's value for the individual fit into a broader ideal of meritocracy that became important during the Enlightenment. In *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, Voltaire compared the burial of Lecouvreur to that of Anne Oldfield as an example of how the English honored the arts and those who enacted the best literary efforts of their nation (114). This publication also caused trouble for Voltaire.

Meritocracy became one of the new values that challenged the balance of secular and sacred power in France and the concept of "*Une foi, un roi, un loi*" (Roche 355). Voltaire raised the subject again in a *Conversation* published in 1761. In this dialogue between an official and an abbé, the official points out the hypocrisy of refusing the rites of marriage and burial to performers while not excommunicating Louis

XIV and his court (who danced before an audience) or the priests, cardinals and even the pope (who watched plays). Why, demands the official, should Lecouvreur's body be left on a street corner? Because, responds the abbé, actors come from poor families without the money or the prestige to demand better treatment, and those who praised Lecouvreur's great talents did nothing when she was buried like a dog (Rivollet 139–40). Here Voltaire uses Lecouvreur to make the need for a meritocracy plain, since only action on the part of an outraged people will change the inequitable treatment of France's citizens. By 1761 the voices of Diderot and Rousseau had joined Voltaire's in his demand for change, changes that the inflexible institutions of church and state would not or could not grant without violent compulsion. At the time of Lecouvreur's death the church responded to the immediate challenge of the actress instead of recognizing her as a symptom of an impending, more formidable social alteration.

Lecouvreur's story showed a talented individual who created her own place in the world, exhibiting an idea that Voltaire applauded. When Adrienne's deathbed produced a text glorifying a romantic love rather than the church, the clergy tried to discredit her performance of values with a demonstration of the ephemeral nature of the body. By destroying her corpse they tried to claim ownership of immortality and morality and to deny both to Adrienne, providing the salutary example that she refused to grant while living.

Lecouvreur's fate was not an isolated incident, but merely the most remarkable manifestation of an attempted systematic purgation by the Roman Catholic Church of the impure body of the actress. This drive continued into the nineteenth century, but post-Enlightenment Parisians responded differently, having learned from the disposal of Lecouvreur not to leave their favorite actresses to the mercy of the church. In 1815 when Marudel, the priest of Saint-Roch, tried to turn away the corpse of Mlle. Raucourt of the Comédie-Française, the crowd brought the body in by force (Truc 217).

Not that France alone condemned the actress. A similar incident in Germany indicates a persistent pattern of priests refusing sacred burial space. Thirty years after the disposal of Lecouvreur, a German peasant buried the actress-manager Carolina Neuber by stealth, because the priest would neither bless or bury an actress (Gilder 225). This secretly respectful treatment resonated less than covert dishonor, to judge by the absence of *Carolina Neuber*, the opera.

In regulating corpses, the Church hoped to regulate its congregation. As Joseph Roach argues about the English actor Thomas Betterton, Lecouvreur represented not only herself and her profession, but her audience as well. Roach's surmise about Betterton and his magnificent funeral is that "in death, as in life, he performed not only for his public but instead of it" (76). In a similar substitution, instead of trying to censor and control its playgoing congregation, the church excommunicated and destroyed the profane body of the actress Lecouvreur.

This plan for oblivion might be considered an antifuneral, reversing the usual commemorative function of a burial ceremony. If, as Roach argues, a funeral may perform a remembering function linking the present to the past, the denial of a funeral signals an institutional reluctance to enshrine something in memory. Denying changing times in which an individual woman could make anti-institutional choices, the clergy evoked a past in which women's bodies remained excluded from the public sphere by keeping Lecouvreur out of the public space of the cemetery. When Lecouvreur would or could not undo her life in the accepted ritual, the clergy, with the cooperation of the municipal authorities, tried to conceal the changes in the status quo by the destruction of the disruptive actress body.

Jennifer Woodward describes funeral ritual as an essential element in reintegrating the social group. But this assumes that it is death that causes a rip in the social fabric. I believe that in the case of actresses, their lives cause as much disruption in the society as their deaths. When an actress dies, society no longer has to

accommodate her all-too-visible presence but has at its disposal a much more manipulable memory. The disruption is at last localized and can be contained within the body and the rituals of burial. These rituals also confirm for the community at large that the actress is truly gone.

The inability of the church and the unwillingness of the crown to accommodate the actress body with any of the usual rituals signaled trouble ahead for these institutions. The clerical attitude that popular figures threatened the church and that methodical obliteration was the only effective method to deal with competition meant that the church wasted efforts in a futile attempt to hide the evidence of dissent. The institutional campaign against dissident opinions in an attempt to keep society undisturbed meant that the emergence of wide-spread dissent ended that form of society. In my next chapter I will show the much more effective strategy of co-option pursued by the English with the actress body of Anne Oldfield. The difference between the ability to make space for the disruptive actress body and the extreme fear of it that led to its destruction may well have been the difference between a society that could adjust to new ideas and a society that led to a revolution.

In an agonistic perspective, deathbeds and graves became theatrical spaces where the clergy and actors performed creating different and opposing texts. Conversely, social events were played out in the theatrical space, with actors subverting or usurping the moral exemplar role of the clergy. Ostensibly, the Parisian clergy expunged all evidence of the intransigent actress body. Yet the church authorities ultimately failed in their attempted erasure of the actress. Lecouvreur's body might have disappeared, but the theatre community she represented would not allow her to vanish. Depending on the perspective, Lecouvreur starred in a final performance as terrible warning, tragic victim, or apotheosized heroine—all alternative surrogations offered by the culture.

To prevent people from following this example, the Parisian clergy required the symbolic banishment of the actress. Although Lecouvreur never proselytized about her way of life, her very existence raised the possibility that people might consider her worthy of emulation. Unable to eliminate actresses from the city's stages, they used their restrictive control to keep actress bodies out of its graveyards. Given a choice between surrendering fame and giving up hope of eternal reward, most actresses chose professional erasure. In the case of Adrienne Lecouvreur, who could not or would not consent to this obliteration, the Church eliminated the profane body itself, attempting to quell potential rebellion by destroying the rebel.

Yet the theatre persisted and its practitioners staged a counterperformance of memory against the religious obliteration. Lecouvreur continued to be commemorated throughout the centuries. In 1786 the woman without a gravestone finally received a tablet. The executor of her will, d'Argental, originally made no attempt at establishing the type of physical commemoration denied Lecouvreur by the church. But in his old age, perhaps affected by the changing times or his own proximity to death, he erected a plaque at 115 rue de Grenelle. The plaque's eight verses praise her pure spirit and heart. Later a play and still later an opera kept the romantic version of Lecouvreur's life in the public eye. Both Rachel and Bernhardt played Lecouvreur to public approval. The themes of romance and art overshadowed and overwhelmed the church's lesson of an apostate justly banished and forgotten by the society. Despite her loss of body, Adrienne Lecouvreur achieved the only verifiable immortality: continued remembrance.



## Chapter Two: Anne Oldfield's Westminster Relations

Anne Oldfield (1683–1730) died movingly and often. An actress adept in both comedy and tragedy, her onstage deaths reflected a sentimental audience's eagerness to witness and pity a woman's demise in the tearful and tragic scenes such as those in *Jane Shore* (1714) and *Sophonisba* (1730). Many from her audience shed tears of regret over Oldfield's actual death. Yet, Oldfield's death savored more of the triumphant than the pitiable. Her interment in Westminster Abbey expanded the horizons for the new profession of actress and culminated a career of social elevation. Her burial both represented and affected significant changes in English culture.

This burial throws into relief questions of gender, social mobility, and the acting profession. Oldfield, an unmarried actress with a lower-class background, created a new precedent with her Westminster internment. The site of her burial marks the unsteadiness of the rapidly changing class system in the time following the disruption of the Protectorate and the restratification of the Restoration. Oldfield represented this instability of class boundaries as she both conformed to and changed the perception of actresses in the eighteenth century. Unlike Lecouvreur, the institutions of Oldfield's society chose to posthumously honor rather than punish Oldfield's aggrandizement of the actress position. Both women excelled as actresses, conducted celebrated liaisons, and associated with some of the most influential thinkers of their day. When they died, the power structure rejected Lecouvreur and assimilated Oldfield. Oldfield lifted her voice in support of an existing power while Lecouvreur became identified with an emergent one. Faced with social change, the English class system accommodated what the French church banned.

Oldfield worked within the system of expected behavior to achieve her own ends of financial independence and social acceptance by the upper classes. While her achievements contributed to her extraordinary burial, members of the Whig political

party, who wished to promote Oldfield's status for personal and political reasons, ultimately arranged for the Westminster interment.

The adaptive Whigs co-opted the adaptable actress to bolster their popular appeal. They used Oldfield, the theatre, and ultimately Oldfield's actress body to promote their political agenda. While Oldfield's funeral owed much to the determination of her Whig lover Churchill, it also resulted from the active involvement of the other Whigs and the complicity of the church of England in the context of new social expectations. Anne Oldfield represented this change as an actress, a profession introduced by the Restoration and one which violated class boundaries left brittle by the commonwealth period. In this profession, a lower-class woman could gain renown and money, similar to the merchants now achieving wealth and standing by trade.

At the same time, Oldfield's life and burial show how the Whigs, the progressive royalist government party, demonstrated their inclusiveness by inducting Oldfield. The Whigs represented both the new order and the party in power at this time (Whigs chose George I as King in 1714; Robert Walpole served as Chancellor of the Exchequer 1721–1744). Oldfield was a safe choice; her social position as a woman and an actress made it unlikely she would challenge their authority. In fact, the evidence suggests that Oldfield followed Whig dictates without attempting to advance a narrative of her own. Then she obligingly died at the height of her fame so the Whigs could initiate a silenced woman into their most exclusive club in a final act of acceptance. Yet even in this case, where the actress seems totally complicit in the appropriation of her reputation and signifying power, the actress body proved disruptive enough to spark opposition to the burial. Oldfield's never erected memorial pays tribute to the class divisions that still existed between the well-born dead and the dead actress in Westminster Abbey.

To understand Oldfield's burial requires an understanding of the position of the actress at this time and how Oldfield resembled and differed from others of her gender, class, and profession. As in the case of Lecouvreur, the actress occupied a liminal

position. As I will discuss later, the brief tradition of English actresses placed actresses a mere rung above the other public women of the age, prostitutes. I will also expand on how Oldfield's biography and English theatrical custom affected her fate, especially the political aspects of both.

What made Oldfield different is a complicated question. That she was different from the usual dead actress is incontrovertible, for the unremarkable fate usual for the body of someone from Anne Oldfield's background would be the parish churchyard. Acting in *The Funeral, or Grief à la Mode*, an early Steele comedy, Oldfield once leapt out of a casket. Steele's satire used the rituals of death to illuminate the foibles of his society. But his fictional scene could not compare in effect to what occurred while Oldfield's body rested sedately in her coffin. Had Westminster been the site of her resurrection instead of her burial, the event would have gained but slightly in significance in terms of the dramatic change Oldfield's honors represented in the body of social opinion about the actress body.

What we know of Oldfield's early life and career resembles the basic story of other English actresses in the eighteenth century, a pattern set during the Restoration. Oldfield began life as a member of a lower-class family. Despite attempts by biographers to enhance her father's status by describing him as a soldier, Oldfield's parents belonged to the inn-keeping class and she grew up to tend bar in a tavern (*Authentick* 14). Soon after her theatrical debut, Oldfield surpassed her rivals both by her talent and her extraordinary versatility. Excellent in both comedy and tragedy, she went from triumph to triumph in her career, enacting roles from the repertory and creating new ones, often those written especially for her. The popular playwright, actor, and manager Colley Cibber credited her as an inspiration, and she created many roles in his plays. Her influence in this way continued throughout her lifetime and even beyond. Aaron Hill intended the role of Elfrid in his tragedy *Athelwold* (1731) for her before death intervened (Avery clii).

Oldfield also played to perfection the witty heroines of the Restoration plays and continued other Restoration-actress traditions as well. Cynthia Lowenthal contextualizes the usual charges of duplicity, of acting as prostitution, and the disruptive quality of the actress with specifics from the late Restoration period. She mentions how Restoration actresses (and in a footnote, how Oldfield) imitated the outward appearance and behavior of the aristocracy so successfully that they became indistinguishable from “real” ladies. Lowenthal suggests that this threat to the social order and the upper-class belief in an essentialist quality of aristocracy led to the focus (shown by writings of the time) on the sexual activities of actresses. The actress joined the ranks of “speaking” women, harlots and whores, instead of the “silent” and virtuous women invisible in their domestic sphere (221). Thus actresses could easily be stripped of their aristocratic trappings and identified instead as sexual objects (231). So the visual spectacle of class mobility could be counteracted by emphasizing the “womanhood” of actresses, indicating their subordination to men as members of that class.

When Oldfield began her successful stage mimicry of ladies she evoked a more complicated response than just a smear campaign of sexual innuendo. She attracted upper-class patrons of both genders. Certainly some spread rumors about her sexual history, but the Whigs actually welcomed her acquisition of the upper-class demeanor. They took advantage of her social-blending abilities to successfully integrate her into their group, which allowed them to nominally include all classes in their party without the inconvenience and disruption of welcoming a true outsider. The Whigs wished to separate Oldfield from her lower-class background altogether, ultimately accomplishing this by the final honored placement/containment of her body when she died. The burial of Oldfield allowed them to define social mobility on their own terms, awarding successful entry into the upper class posthumously to an exceptional talent.

As the liberal party (as opposed to the Tories), the Whigs wanted to maintain their political power while acknowledging and even encouraging social change. The

eighteenth century saw the rise of a merchant class whose money and tastes began to shape British society. The aristocratic, land-owning Whigs made common cause and the occasional alliance with the wealthy merchants whose financial ventures increased their own prosperity.

Eighteenth-century theatre reflected the changes in society and appealed to this new audience. Sentimental comedy, typified by plays such as Steele's *The Conscious Lovers* (1722) with its text celebrating chastity, contrasted strongly with Restoration sex comedies such as *The London Cuckolds* (1681) and *The Country Wife* (1675).

The profession of actress also changed, though less drastically. Established by Charles II in imitation of the French theatre, the creation of that profession marked the changed mores and concerns of the Restoration that allowed a woman to publicly display her talents onstage. As in the French theatre, the stage also became a place where men of influence could find beautiful companions, ratified by public applause. But the status of the profession evolved beyond that point. The monarch's beloved Nell Gwyn found her eternal rest in St Martin-in-the-Fields (MacGregor-Hastie 189), humble surroundings compared to the grandeur of Westminster Abbey.

What brought the former barmaid to such eminence? Oldfield possessed neither birth nor breeding yet earned her living by her pretenses to both. She received her training for high society from the stage, a suspect institution at best, a reputedly licentious one at worst. As an actress she also lived with the stigma of duplicity not shared by men in the theatre (Lowenthal 222). Yet she eventually took her place in aristocratic circles in life and continued to do so in the tributes that followed her death. As the only actress buried inside the walls of the Abbey (Smith 265), her body remains set apart from others in her profession.

Although Anne Oldfield exceeded the norm in the extent of her obsequies, a presentation of Oldfield as an anomaly ignores the wider context of the achievement of English actresses. From official ban to Abbey burial, the quick ascension of the actress

had everything to do with the sociopolitical circumstances of the new profession. More than time separated Anne Oldfield from Nell Gwyn. When Gwyn performed, the King and the court dominated the playhouse. In the eighteenth century, the middle class and even servants took their seats in the theatre. This democratization changed the atmosphere, and the dramas frequently reflected the political debates of the day. This affected the actresses, as playwrights put more politically charged speeches in their works, making actresses spokeswomen for their views.

The shift from the Restoration came gradually, and many actresses continued to embody the qualities prized in the Restoration, specifically beauty and accessibility. Such women followed in the footsteps of Restoration actress *par excellence* Nell Gwyn. Gwyn embodied the Restoration actress virtues of wit, talent and sexual attractiveness. An acclaimed actress at seventeen, by eighteen she became King Charles' "favourite whore" (MacGregor-Hastie 82). This soon meant a house of her own instead of lodgings, and respectful deference from her associates. Other actresses also based significant social achievement in sexual politics, and this pattern continued throughout the next century.

The satirist Tom Brown's oft-quoted Honey-Pot line (humorously ascribed by him to the deceased Aphra Behn) describes one way in which actresses became more closely linked with their social superiors. If a pretty woman could not "keep herself honest in a theatre," (272) she could at least bargain for a profitable exchange. These arrangements diverged from the customary brief and anonymous sexual encounters with women solely employed in sexual trafficking. Nor did actresses need to seek out their customers as did the masked prostitutes in the audience. As Brown's verse implies, sexual suitors pursued performing women regardless of their wishes. The press also disseminated the image of actress as sexual object, and the public enjoyed these accounts (Brewer 346).

Visibility and talent gave actresses a unique appeal to their male viewers, who could simultaneously gratify their desire for sex and for display, the appetites of both the body and the ego. But the boundaries of class that separated these women from the men who wished to enjoy their favors weakened over time. The position of the actress differed from that of the prostitute because of her relative visibility (to the theatre-going public) and a social position independent from her sexual function. In the eighteenth century, Oldfield's relationships resembled marriage more closely than prostitution, so she could associate with royalty while a lower-class mistress could not.

Other social signifiers lent weight to actress claims for respectability. Unlike the French who would not let actresses use the honored title "Madame," mature English actresses invariably adopted the respectable prefix "Mrs." in their stage billings and social life. But despite the honorific, most actresses were regarded as "Misses," another term for kept women<sup>2</sup>. Many actresses did accept fees for favors. They certainly had strong economic motives to do so. Lafler notes that when women first became professional actresses (and even after) they could not become actor-sharers but remained mere salaried players (214). This trend continued as theatre companies usually paid actresses substantially lower salaries than actors (Avery lxviii).

With many fewer female than male roles in every play and about half as many actresses as actors in a company (Avery cxxi), actresses could easily be replaced. This meant little leverage in salary negotiations. In addition, actress expenses exceeded those of the men (Howe 10). In this situation, patrons could provide not only food and shelter but also the expensive clothing so necessary as costumes for an actress during this period.

The advent of the English actress slightly altered the nature of England's social structure, offering a new occupation for women that quickly (perhaps concurrently)

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<sup>2</sup> As MacGregor-Hastie bluntly puts it, "the style Miss was accorded only to whores" (46).

became the gateway to a status-enhanced version of the usual career for destitute women, prostitution. The stage showcased the actresses as potential purchases and trophies. As it brought women into the public sphere, and the previously private transaction between keeper and kept woman into the open, it became acceptable and even expected for men of the upper classes to accessorize their costly outfits with actresses in even costlier attire. Yet actress-mistresses clearly differed from prostitutes because they openly moved into social circles that excluded mistresses of inferior birth.

This acceptance of actresses as guests at aristocratic gatherings coincided with a more general weakening of class divisions. Before the Restoration, arranged marriages among the aristocracy kept the social boundaries distinct. During the commonwealth period, democratic notions threatened that order, with the extreme view represented by Gerrard Winstanley's declaration that men and women should marry where they loved (Fraser 270). In the Restoration the upper and middle classes quickly resumed the careful choosing of mates, but class lost some of its importance in the choosing. Wealth now strongly influenced the selection process.

The commonwealth period, which impoverished many noble houses, enriched the middle classes. The nobility discovered that to restore ancestral homes to their former splendor required something aside from a good lineage. So the daughters of wealthy merchants became more eligible than those of the upper classes, who frequently languished unmarried. A man conferred his status on his wife, while a woman took on that of her husband. Thus aristocratic fathers would not allow their daughters to marry beneath themselves.

Something of this mobility affected actresses. Although few initially wed into the upper classes, many took on a type of protector/protective coloration from the men who financially supported them. This appears as a new development since the profession of actress made these social climbing women traceable. Apart from royal mistresses, the kept women of the pre-Restoration period lived and died obscurely.



During the Restoration, Charles II not only introduced the actress to English stages, he set the example of using the stage as a place of procurement with a succession of actresses in the Royal bedchamber. Nell Gwyn, the most famous and successful of Charles II's playhouse mistresses, obtained her own establishment and titles for her children. King Charles spent lavishly on his pleasures, which included many actresses. When he introduced actresses to the British theatre, he created a revolving display for himself from which to choose the most talented and beautiful women for the not-so-new profession of King's mistress. Actresses attracted admirers from all walks of life, and men who could afford to patronize an actress probably did so. I focus on relationships with aristocrats because of the effect these liaisons had on actress prestige, and because more is known about these relationships.

Other social factors complicated the position of actresses and eventually contributed to the rise of Oldfield as someone worthy of respect. Susan Wiseman suggests that the proliferation of private and family performances during the interregnum could have altered attitudes about women performers (162). These often overlooked private theatricals may have helped ameliorate the standing of professional actresses.

In this tradition and in sharp contrast to the Nell Gwyn model, the Restoration actress Mary Saunderson coached princesses in decorum and became renowned for her virtue. Indeed, about one quarter of the actresses seemingly avoided illicit arrangements, instead choosing marriages to fellow thespians (Fraser 425). Still, when Thomas Brown wrote the letter of "The Worthy Aphra Behn to the Famous Virgin Actress," he credited reputedly chaste actresses with greater discretion than their colleagues, not with greater virtue. Thus, in the view of many, an actress could choose between being a known or a suspected whore.

Possibly writers like Brown distorted public attitude. Actresses may have suffered less from social stigma and commanded a more positive public image than is generally

believed today. Deborah C. Payne argues that Restoration and eighteenth-century audiences did not regard actresses as loose women, but that that view belonged to embittered writers who resented their own relatively limited access to genteel society and then revenged themselves with lampoons and satires. Her view, partially based on an analysis of prologues and epilogues spoken by women, expands the role of the actress beyond that of “object,” contending that the commodification of actresses is much more a creation of our discourse than that of the Restoration. Payne asserts instead that audiences appreciated actress’s talents and merely gossiped about their private lives.

Because of biographers and pamphleteers, the general public knew that most attractive actresses had the option of trading favors for financial support. Lord Rochester tutored the attractive young actress Elizabeth Barry; in 1677 she bore him a daughter (Greene 69). Others besides bitter satirists believed that actresses took advantage of their opportunities to exchange sex for status. Judith Milhous describes how the Restoration stage capitalized on the display of female sexuality, and Kristina Straub notes that this strategy continued well into the nineteenth century (Straub 101). Public admiration helped establish actresses, but that admiration cannot be separated from sexual admiration, particularly since certain favored spectators cultivated more personal and proprietary relationships with their favorite actresses. Straub believes that coding these relationships by class eased the social disruption caused by an actress’s public sexuality, in a familiar paradigm that commodified lower-class women as the rightful property of upper-class men (91).

Payne tilts the scale too far in the other direction, crediting these lower-class performers with complete autonomy from social realities, including control over the prologues and epilogues they spoke. Because playwrights, not actresses, authored the words, examination of these works may tell us more about what the playwrights wished the audience to perceive than the power dynamics of the actual situation. Just because

the playwright wrote a speech asserting the sexual independence of the actress does not mean that the actress who spoke that speech agreed with those sentiments.

At the same time, I believe that the actress gained stature if not respect from these speeches. The audience in this situation heard the words as those of the performer, not the character. This gave the actress the chance to shape public perception in a way not available to women in the sex trades. This emergence of the actress as a speaking presence shifts attention away from the actress body to the actress voice, giving the actress a new dimension and greater credibility as a cultural representative (rather than a public commodity).

Yet none of this fully accounts for Oldfield's final placement. As demonstrated by the life and death of Nell Gwyn, acting talent and patronage, even royal patronage, did not suffice to elevate the actress to a position of respect and wide cultural influence. Nor was Oldfield's lover Churchill the first aristocrat to patronize an actress body. That had happened already in 1706 when the Duke of Devonshire memorialized his favorite the actress Mary Anne Campion in a Buckinghamshire churchyard (noted by Oldfield biographer Egerton in *Faithfull Memoirs* 50). Oldfield's biographer makes this lengthy digression and others to show "monarchs, and persons of the *first* distinction, who have . . . fallen willing victims to a theatrical Venus" (55). In other words, many actresses could rely on finding admirers of wealth and position, and might consequently improve their social position to some degree, if not to the extent of an Oldfield.

Actress Anastasia Robinson became a sign of the changing times when she legitimized her own status. In 1722 Robinson legally broke through the class barriers by marrying Charles Mordaunt, Earl of Peterborough. The age and eccentricity of the bridegroom, and the secrecy of the ceremony, muted her achievement, but the previously unthinkable had occurred and would eventually set a precedent. The Earl acknowledged the relationship in 1735, shortly before his death. Although the widow remained at the Earl's country seat of Bevis Mount, she counted among her friends the

Duchess of Portland. Cranstoun Metcalfe happily adduces this as complete acceptance of the Countess by her peers-by-marriage (20). In contrast to Peterborough's secrecy, the Duke of Bolton openly ran away to the continent with the actress Lavinia Fenton<sup>3</sup> in 1728. He wished to marry her, but they had to wait twenty-three years until his Duchess died. Lavinia Fenton finally became Duchess of Bolton in 1751 (Metcalfe 38–39).

Robinson and Fenton followed the example of Nell Gwyn, who left the stage to devote herself to her man (and possibly her own enjoyment) and their subsequent position relied entirely on the status of their husbands rather than their achievements as actresses. Nell Gwyn neglected her career when under protection, and she retired from the stage for good by 1677, telling the King that he could now make her a duchess since she was no longer an actress (MacGregor-Hastie 137). She gave up a public forum that brought her immense popularity for a world limited by the King's desires, the machinations of her rivals, and the scorn of the more virtuous or more discreet women at court. Nor did she receive the coveted title, though the King made their son, Charles, Duke of St Albans.

One difference between Oldfield and these women is that she chose to continue her career instead of retiring to private life with a protector. In fact, her lovers often advanced and supported her acting. As with many actresses, her first patron (Sir John Vanbrugh) in the theatre was rumored to be her first lover. And those who wrote for her in the theatre often expressed warm admiration for Oldfield personally. Her liaison with Arthur Maynwaring first established her socially, but she continued to act. In fact, Maynwaring seems an unusual choice as a protector, because his birth surpassed his fortune. Oldfield's biographers describe the arrangement as one of mutual affection.

So Oldfield continued to work in the suspect milieu of the theatre. Yet, unlike the actresses mentioned above who deserted the stage, she consorted with the upper

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<sup>3</sup> Best known for her role as Polly Peachum in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*.

classes, including respectable women among the nobility and the royal family, on friendly terms. Like Lecouvreur, her grace and affability brought her acceptance; unlike Lecouvreur, it seems no one expected her to perform for their hospitality. Sequestered Robinson, exiled Fenton, and even popular Gwyn (King Charles could command tolerance, but not the friendship of ladies for his mistresses) never entered society in this way.

Oldfield's lover Maynwaring attended exclusive Whig gatherings at the Kit-Cat club and figured in society as a wit and amateur writer. He undoubtedly helped bring Oldfield into fashion, but this only started her social climb. Though he had a seat in Parliament and could have been a statesman, he seemed contented to remain a witty spokesman for the Whigs and not much more (Robins *Palmy* 64). After his death she apparently chose her next admirer based on his connections and resources. Not surprisingly, she chose another leading member of the Whigs. Oldfield now counted as a Whig herself by association with Maynwaring and his friends, and through her public identification with the Whig cause through her roles in plays by Whig adherents, such as Colley Cibber. Her decision to ally herself with Brigadier-General Churchill, nephew (and later half-brother) of the Duke of Malborough, solidified her Whiggish reputation. Churchill brought her to court and eventually to the Abbey.

Oldfield's love life differed little in its general outline from Mademoiselle Lecouvreur's. She had several lovers and several children out of wedlock. Oldfield's long alliances with Mr. Maynwaring and Brigadier-General Churchill were public knowledge. That the fates of Lecouvreur and Oldfield diverged so radically attests to the very different social forces at work in the two countries.

Even in relatively tolerant England, General Churchill never married Oldfield except in rumor, a whispered undercurrent that resurfaced repeatedly (Robins *Palmy* 149), juicy gossip because of the shock value of such a marriage. Yet the court welcomed her, and high society rewarded Oldfield's discretion and faithfulness by tacit

approval of her unlawful relationships. As an unmarried woman she transgressed less than she would have by acquiring a legal title to the class ceded to her by unspoken agreement. Not demanding her status as a right allowed the influential to become benefactors, and they continued to honor her after death. In a society increasingly intruded upon by unwelcome claimants, Oldfield allowed her social superiors to behave as if her presence was their idea.

Social connections cannot fully account for Oldfield's interment in the most respected burial spot in England. Lecouvreur and other actresses could claim friends and lovers in high places, but full acceptance into the upper class eluded them. Oldfield's profession as an actress gave her a claim on public admiration that differentiated her from a beloved kept woman and her acting talent distinguished her from other actresses, yet these factors alone could not surmount the weakening but still formidable boundaries between classes.

During her lifetime, Oldfield felt and suffered from these limits. However well her successful stage imitations of ladies allowed her to fit in with high society, her talent did not always give her the prerogatives of that rank. One account relates that when her lover Maynwaring became ill, she envied the right of a wife to nurse him. Instead, his sister Grisel refused to let her even see him (Gore-Browne 122). Lafler surmises that Grisel may have kept Oldfield away at the beginning of his illness in August, but that Oldfield nursed him in November because of a recorded hiatus in her performances. Oldfield lacked all legal standing and could have been barred from Maynwaring's funeral and estate until he made his will in September (99–101) After his death, when Maynwaring's will named her his executrix, Grisel protested the appointment. A Tory attack in *The Examiner* accused Maynwaring of rejecting family and religion and bestowing "the Monumental Legacies of *Whig-Honesty*, on a *Celebrated Actress*, who is too much admired upon the Stage, to have any Enquiry made into her Conduct behind the Curtain" (qtd. in Lafler 105). As an actress, her lowly station left her

vulnerable to scandalous accusations. These included a scurrilous rumor suggesting that Maynwaring died of venereal disease. Oldfield confronted these rumors directly by having the body exhumed and examined. The doctor found the body “as sound as his judgment” as a Whig put it (Gore-Browne 123–4).

This incident establishes the importance of Oldfield’s own personality in the establishment of her reputation and her ultimate fate. Although Oldfield’s career confirmed her lower-class status, without her occupation she could never have achieved such recognition. She navigated the perilous waters of the theatre business well enough to command both money and respect. While at Drury Lane she refused to accept a reduction in the money paid to her from her benefit that the wily manager claimed as compensation for additional costs. Oldfield’s example and the manager’s ill treatment led several of the leading actors to seek alternative employment, and Oldfield left for the more congenial management of the reopened Haymarket. That management there was to include herself, Cibber, Wilks, and Dogget. Then Dogget asserted that, despite his respect and admiration for Mrs. Oldfield, he thought that the board should all be of one gender. This oddly stated prejudice did not result in a board of actresses but in the expulsion of Mrs. Oldfield. Mrs. Oldfield agreed to the ouster provided she was compensated by a fixed salary of 200 pounds a year and a benefit with no deductions.

This story indicates a business-minded woman who wasted no time trying to alter the mindset of her colleagues; she instead used their guilt and gallantry to her best advantage. Cibber describes her as responding to Dogget’s affront as to a favor and cites her gracious behavior as a reason for their willingness to increase that salary later (Cibber 220–1). In other words, when she wanted more money she tacitly or explicitly reminded them that they owed her particular consideration. Another story describes how she defused a tense situation over casting by gently laughing at all the men for making such a fuss. As with the role of Millamant, Oldfield clearly worked within gender expectations, using light-hearted charm to achieve her ends. “With all this Merit, she

was tractable and less presuming in her Station than several that had not half her Pretensions to be troublesome” (Cibber 168). Oldfield avoided the alien notion of equal treatment and appealed to the familiar one of gallantry. Men honored this adherence to accepted behavior, paradoxically sometimes breaking tradition to oblige her.

Another tangible proof of her talent and acumen is the scheduling of her benefit performances. As Avery notes, only principal actors received independent benefits and all actors tried to have their benefits as close to the lucrative winter theatre season as possible and before the benefits of the other performers. In the 1708–1709 season Oldfield had a benefit in February, earlier than all the others noted. In 1716–1717 her benefit came second in the sequence and, in 1720, she and Mrs. Porter obtained an order to keep anyone from having a benefit earlier than theirs (Avery xcvi). By her own exertions, Oldfield became the financial equivalent of a successful city merchant. Like them, she bargained for the best price for her goods and made a sizeable profit.

Although her money assisted her social rise, Oldfield did not buy her way into Westminster Abbey. Nor did all notable and/or well-connected actresses join her there. We must look more closely at Oldfield and her activities to understand how death bettered her class. She wrote no memoir and little direct documentary evidence remains that would help our conjectures about her feelings and personality. Surmises about her disposition mainly rest on a few stories about her theatre career in other peoples’ accounts, such as those already mentioned. Most of the other comments center on the characters she played. For instance, in his memoirs Colley Cibber describes how he created one of Oldfield's most successful roles, Lady Betty Modish, after witnessing an early stage triumph by Oldfield. He had earlier set aside the play (*The Careless Husband*) despairing of finding an appropriate actress for the part, but Oldfield came to embody the role for him (167). This reinforces the idea that Oldfield easily impersonated the manners and speech of women of higher birth. Gossiping playwright Steele subsequently refers to Oldfield as "Lady Betty Modish."



Such identification tempts the researcher to assume that Oldfield indeed shared the qualities of this aristocratic character. In describing Oldfield, Colley Cibber directs us back to the characters he created with her in mind, asserting that Oldfield lacked only rank to be in truth "an agreeably gay Woman of Quality, a little too conscious of her natural Attractions" (*Apology* 167). Still, one should be cautious about accepting this type of identification, since, as Lesley Ferris points out in *Acting Women*, a strong tendency exists in male critics to deny any skill to actresses by asserting they merely represented themselves on the stage (44). Yet if Lady Betty Modish did not represent Mrs. Oldfield, she represented the popular idea of the actress, even more so if men doubted her ability to play any part she did not live and so completely conflated the actress with the successfully assumed stage role. This public image indeed elevated Oldfield's status above that of a woman-for-hire, though it had its limitations. Since at the time, no women of any class achieved parity with men, Oldfield transgressed class but not gender divisions. Marriage commodified Lady Betty and her offstage counterparts just as more direct sexual trafficking affected women of lower station.

In fact the playwright explicitly reveals his belief that gender relations remain the same whether the women involved are ladies or actresses. When Lady Easy taxes Lady Betty with "At this rate you would rather be thought beautiful than good," and Lady Betty responds, "As I had rather command than obey . . . in short, I can't see a woman of spirit has any business in this world but to dress—and make the men like her," (*Careless Husband* II.i.38-42) she gives a reasonably accurate job description for an English actress as well as for a woman of quality. Whatever Mrs. Oldfield's own sentiments may have been, this speech summed her up for her male auditors. Possibly the reminder of her gender's social inferiority counterbalanced the threat of her class transgression.

Oldfield played a succession of similar roles that some assumed represented her personality. These characters shared nobility of birth, allowing Oldfield to escape class

boundaries without visible rebellion against cultural norms. Cibber created several of the aristocratic parts that she originated and with which the public identified her. While Steele called her Modish, others identified her by her later roles of Townley and Calista. These roles all emphasized the attributes of a witty well-born lady, a part Oldfield apparently played to perfection.

If Oldfield identified herself with any of these well-born characters, it may have been Millamant, the sophisticated and witty realist of *The Way of the World* (1700). Since Oldfield usually chose to play Millamant at her benefits, she obviously found the role suited her temperamentally and/or financially. Millamant at once represents a woman who wishes to change and maintain the status quo. She causes no disruption in society as a whole, but plots to make her own marriage different from the marriages of those around her. Superior to Oldfield in class, Millamant creates a personal mystique, a separation of herself from the generality of women as Oldfield succeeded in doing.

In Pat Gill's analysis of Millamant, Millamant's attempt to keep herself a mystery is not only "a consummate portrayal of a typical Restoration heroine" but a stereotyped view of women in general. Oldfield chose to present herself not in a new role (in either sense, since the play was an old one), but in the most powerful of the roles accepted for women. In fact, the role of Millamant built on Oldfield's power base as an actress (or speaking woman). Gill argues that it is Millamant's linguistic self-awareness that gave her and women of that class power, both in the play and in the culture (166–7). Just as Gill argues that Millamant uses her verbal ability to gain her objectives while maintaining the crucial appearance of innocence, so did Oldfield. As an actress playing Millamant, she appeared innocent of ambitions to actually be a lady in her own right. But the more she succeeded in publicly identifying herself with her role, the more she demonstrated her power of expression, the more she transgressed the boundaries of class. For the culture allotted that power only to the well-born, and then only within the confines of private social interactions. As someone who could also speak publicly before and after

the play, Oldfield could use the often maligned doubleness of the actress to her advantage, shielding her boldness with her occupation.<sup>4</sup> Thus she confused and destabilized the usual boundaries between the lower-class and upper-class woman.

This aspect of the curtain speeches probably never occurred to their writers, whose range of purposes only incidentally included the advancement of the actress. Yet the political tenor of many of these writings proved decisive in Oldfield's posthumous career. Even before Oldfield spoke for the Whigs, the theatre became politicized as a center of both real and imagined class encounters. Class tensions infused Restoration drama. Social conflict became subject matter for Restoration plays, and the patronage of actresses by the wealthy and noble paralleled the Restoration stage dramas like *The London Cuckolds* (1681) that showed the potent aristocracy sexually triumphing over the money-grubbing cits. J. Douglas Canfield stresses that these plays constitute class warfare, pitting the Court against the City of London (114). His Foucauldian analysis shows how the Whig (or Whig allied) women in these dramas became symbols for the England the Tory cavaliers could dominate through sexual conquest. Small wonder then that the cavaliers in the audience wished to emulate their stage counterparts and sleep with the women who played these desirable symbols. Thus the playhouse offered Tories a double opportunity to assert their ascendancy over the Whigs through the play and with the actresses.

When the Whigs rose to power, the drama changed its character to match the times. The Whigs and their allies became more sympathetic characters in the drama, instead of stupid cuckolds; they were honest (rather than witty) fathers and lovers in plays like *The London Merchant* and *The Conscious Lovers*. But the political element that made the drama an elevation for the actress involved the prologues and epilogues.

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, another favorite role was Estefania in *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife*, a servant who successfully pretends to be a rich aristocrat (Lafler 60).

No longer merely prizes for the victors in the class struggle, women stood out onstage as representatives of a political viewpoint.

I believe Oldfield's curtain speeches not only reflected the political struggle, but were a decisive factor in her burial. Although Oldfield's championship of the Whig cause mainly consisted of speaking the words written for her by such well-known Whigs as Cibber and Maynwaring, her talent and personal popularity ensured their favorable reception. As with other aspects of her career, she achieved her goals while never violating the appearance of decorous womanhood. Through Cibber's authorship, her association with Maynwaring and Churchill and, possibly, her own inclination, Anne Oldfield became a symbol for the Whigs.

This political affiliation glorified her in the eyes of a powerful group of men but also caused others to attack her in the press. Lafler concludes that the vicious aspersions against Oldfield's reputation were actually veiled Tory assaults on her Whig lover Maynwaring (96). Yet even Jacobites apparently admired her acting. When they came to hiss Cibber's anti-Jacobite play, *The Provok'd Husband*, they stayed on to cheer Oldfield as Lady Townly (Robins *Palmy* 234). When she delivered the epilogue, a single spectator hissed. She paused and said "poor creature" a comment that brought thunderous applause (Avery cxxvi).

Did Oldfield's own political convictions jibe with those of her associates? Publicly they did. Performers often stepped out of their roles to speak prologues and epilogues, and though the speaker might still play a role every bit as artificial as the character from the play, convention established these framing verses as a moment when the actor or actress spoke as themselves. In an epilogue (written by Cibber) she spoke after *The Victim* in 1714, Oldfield referred to the difficulty of acting with a trapdoor two feet wide while wearing a nine foot wide petticoat (Avery cix). Epilogues often drew attention to theatricality and took humorous advantage of exposing the speaker as a performer with an individual viewpoint.

So when Oldfield spoke an epilogue, her audience might well believe the words to be the opinion of Oldfield the actress. And in the Royal Theatre of Drury Lane, these epilogues often affirmed Whig principles of liberty and staunch anti-Jacobism. These speeches established the actress herself as a prominent Whig. For instance, in 1716 Oldfield delivered an applauded Epilogue on the cause of liberty. No doubt the listeners rewarded the speaker for the sentiments.

Oldfield's listeners belonged to more than one social class. After the aristocratic domination of the Restoration, the early eighteenth-century audience included an increasing number of the middle classes, and even apprentices and servants (Avery clx). This contrasted sharply with France, where lackeys were not admitted. The Restoration had done away with the Renaissance split between public and private theatres (Wiseman 160). Now all classes attended the same theatres, though seating divisions maintained class distinctions. The growing population of London was accommodated by theatre (and class divisions) into pit, boxes, and gallery.

Paradoxically, the lower-class audience increased the power of the performers even though disruptive and rowdy behavior more often disrupted the English theatres than happened in France. The actress depended less on the good will of the aristocracy since the lower classes could also swell the applause and the coffers. Many anecdotes (such as the "poor creature" incident mentioned above) attest to the ability of actresses to sway or control the frequently unruly crowd. Megan Terry asserts that the theatre gives women a chance to speak without interruption. Yet in the eighteenth century, the power to avenge an interruption by the audience, and to make that interruption a way of influencing people, presented an unprecedented opportunity for women. Actresses achieved the sought after subject position more from their unscripted interaction with the audience than from any other moment on stage.

According to Gore-Browne, when Oldfield died a regular political committee met that included Brigadier-General Churchill, Lord Hervey, and Sir Robert Walpole who

determined that “So good a Whig should be buried anywhere the Whigs pleased!” (187). As with the Duke of Devonshire, they took the opportunity of death to express their admiration, but the burial also served their political ends.

But Oldfield represented more than a political party. She belonged to a new profession that enabled her, a woman, to attract an approving audience of men while she publicly voiced political opinions. In death, the public admired her excellence in that profession and ascribed her burial as a suitable honor for her acting talent. Oldfield’s performance of tragic heroines such as Sophonisba supported alternative narrative of pure artistic achievement. And the toll that her acting exacted from her health embellished the idea of theatrical excellence with artistic martyrdom.

Voltaire, in the letter where he indignantly compared Oldfield’s burial to Lecouvreur’s ignominious fate, attributes her honors to “mere Merit” rather than any political machinations. However, he repeats an interesting viewpoint that, if it existed, presumed an international political motivation. He states that some pretend to believe the circumstances of Oldfield’s burial a deliberate ploy to shame the French for their “Barbarity and Injustice” in the disposal of Lecouvreur’s body (114). Whether this view existed or Voltaire invented it to shame the French himself, it shows the power of burial as a political and social symbol.

Unlike Lecouvreur, whose rumored final words perhaps led to her body’s disintegration, Oldfield’s death scene seems unconnected to the disposal of her remains. Yet the assumptions about and accounts of her last moments provide evidence of an attitude generally consistent with her subsequent enshrinement in Westminster Abbey. Unlike France, the aristocracy in England, not the church, made the final decision on the actress body. And instead of excluding the actress body, the aristocracy decided to assimilate the potentially destabilizing force.

No reliable record or dramatic evocation exists of what, if anything, Oldfield actually spoke of on her deathbed. Oldfield’s known preparations for death came

earlier, with the making of her will. This document echoes the accounts of the competent businesswoman who made the best possible bargains for her talent, with its careful provision for her sons from her accumulated wealth and other bequests to friends and relations (*Authentick Memoirs* 37). She left legacies to her mother, her aunt Jane Gourlaw, and her maid Margaret Saunders. Her house went to her young son Charles Churchill, while her son by Maynwaring received the bulk of the money. (Lafler 166-7).

The author of Oldfield's *Authentick Memoirs* describes suffering nobly borne until the pain forced cries from her that disturbed her neighbors. According to the same source, Churchill stayed with her constantly (until his health suffered) and continued to visit her frequently. At the last, the author asserts, she settled her worldly affairs and spent her remaining time in repentance (36). Fyvie doubts the sincerity of this passage, since "this talk about a sincere repentance for a misspent life appears to be only a conventional tag" (54).

In the *Faithful Memoirs*, the author mentions that the clergy did not attend Oldfield in her last moments. Mr. Maevius, an abridger of the book, cites the fact that she died attended only by her friend Mrs. Saunders; this point frees her from any suspicion of being "priest-ridden" and inclines "this enlighten'd age to have the better Opinion of Mrs. Oldfield's Religion" (*Grubstreet Journal*, March 25 Number 64). The Church of England required no rejection of the theatre, and Oldfield apparently made none. What caused suspicion and eternal exile in France occasioned praise in England, and Oldfield's inferred assertion of independence from the church accorded with an age tired of religious divisions. At the same time it indicated the weakness of a once stabilizing force, and Oldfield's action may have reinforced a general judgment of the church's increasing irrelevance.

If Oldfield's deathbed lacked drama, her interment provided all the splendor that an actress might wish. Every element from costume to scenery to cast equaled or

surpassed her living performances. Presumably Churchill stage-managed all this splendor and footed the bills. A Westminster Abbey funeral required not only social influence, but cash. The Dean and the Chapter exacted fees for burials. And Mrs. Oldfield's much discussed lace-and-linen winding sheet cost an extra two pounds and ten shillings, the fine for not using domestically produced wool (Carpenter 249). Appareled in Brussels lace and new kid gloves, her body lay in state in the Jerusalem Chamber of Westminster Abbey, centerstage for a well attended final appearance. Her pallbearers included Lord de la Warr, John, Lord Hervey of Ickworth, Bubb Dodington, Charles Hedges, Walter Carey, and Captain Elliott (Robins *Twelve* 72–73). Her two illegitimate sons acted as chief mourners. Buried beneath Congreve's monument, her resting place confirmed her space in memory as a superlative theatre practitioner.

Churchill served as pallbearer for Congreve's 1727 funeral in the Abbey, and that experience may have influenced his proposal that Oldfield be buried there. Although unusual, there was a precedent for performer burials. The actor Thomas Betterton and his actress wife Mary Betterton preceded Oldfield into the Abbey in 1710 and 1711 respectively. Joseph Roach makes a persuasive case that Betterton owed this honor to his representation of kings and a cultural desire to mend the break in succession the Commonwealth caused. In the circumstances, it seems unlikely that Mary Betterton would have received an Abbey burial had she died before her husband. Popular sentiment aroused by the first Betterton funeral probably secured Mrs. Betterton the place by her husband's side when she died the year after he did. In 1830 Oldfield became the second actress and the first unmarried actress to be buried in the Abbey.

The cultural significance of this event appears most clearly in the literary works the burial inspired. As I will argue in my chapter on Sarah Bernhardt, celebrity news did not become a driving force until the nineteenth century with the proliferation of daily papers. Instead of reportage, eighteenth-century writers chose the more literary forms of poetry and memoir. So the memory of Oldfield's burial remains as much, if not more,



in the literary as in the historical record . Because my concern here is the social reaction to Oldfield, I will deal with the literary tributes to her at some length with a specific focus on how they addressed the question of Oldfield's social class.

Literary outpourings followed Oldfield's entombment with almost death-of-Princess-Diana speed. *The Authentick Memoirs* came out in 1730 and quickly went into a third edition. *The Faithful Memoirs* followed and competed with this volume in 1731. These books represented the lower class from which Oldfield ascended, appealed to the prosperous middle class which she joined, and made much of the high society in which she was buried. These readily available and widely read books particularly testified to Oldfield's popularity with the middle-class pamphlet-reading London public. This popularity also confirms Whig wisdom in choosing Oldfield as a curtain representative and posthumous member of their elite.

Literary tributes aimed at the elite also abounded. *The Gentleman's Magazine or, Monthly Intelligencer* brought out its first edition in January 1731, devoting space to five poetic epitaphs for Anne Oldfield—three written in Latin. In addition, in its July issue the magazine published a review of an abridgment of *The Faithful Memoirs* and reprinted a "vision" from *The Weekly Register* that featured a dialogue between Anne Oldfield and those buried near her. Richard Savage, a sometime playwright and frequent recipient of Oldfield's bounty, published an ode considerably longer than the epitaphs featured in the magazines.

In another lengthy poem, "A Pastoral Elegy on the Death of Calista", the anonymous writer addresses the class issue by a metaphorical leveling that makes Oldfield and Churchill peasants. With a dedication to "Colonel C---rchill," the author clearly hopes to interest the nobility in this work. The writer uses the tropes of nature to escape the class hierarchy Oldfield disrupted. In the elegy, the shepherds Arcas and Alexis discuss the death of Arcas' wife Calista and describe her many virtues in an odd mingling of sheep and stage. The omen of a wolf-ravaged ewe immediately precedes

the mention of Oldfield's triumph, as Townley and the general mourning of nature over her loss pervades the poem. By choosing to emphasize the sundered bond between Oldfield and her lover, the writer highlights the class difference elided by the pastoral setting.

The title of the elegy provides a possible subtext to the poem, one that may gesture at Oldfield's boundary crossing. Oldfield's role in *Calista, or The Fair Penitent* featured Oldfield as the unfaithful wife and penitent of the title. In the elegy the choice of that name and the wedded bliss of the pastoral pair contrast oddly with this narrative, and neither situation mirrors Oldfield's own. In the drama Calista is a fallen woman who yet personifies virtuous suffering (Howe 126). In the elegy the innocent shepherdess dies, and all nature acknowledges her superiority. The writer's naming strategy may subtly refer to the class divide and Oldfield's technical fallen woman status while yet asserting that her virtues deserve the tribute of the natural (non-hierarchical) world.

In the idealized world of the poem no difference in station separates the loving pair and death will not divide them. The poet writes that Arcas prepares to join Calista in the grave: "In *Death*, as *Life*, the BRIDEGROOM and the BRIDE" [SIC]. The trope of pastoral simplicity allowed the author to ignore the irregularity of the actual relationship in favor of what he then presents as its spiritual equivalent. Even more importantly, the translation of the lovers to a different sphere makes Oldfield's birth irrelevant and disposes of the clash of classes.

Richard Savage also dedicated his poem to Churchill but slighted the narrative form in favor of a panegyric. Savage explains the coupling of Churchill and Oldfield not with an appeal to an idealized world without class distinctions but with a reversion to the woman as property belief. In this commodification of Oldfield, Churchill appears in the verses as the winner of Oldfield's affections against competitors by the thousands. According to Savage, Oldfield brought Churchill beauty and wit, and he gave her "renown." Substitute the words "social advancement" for renown, and the description

frames the alliance as an exchange of Oldfield's talents for Churchill's. This reductive view never mentions Oldfield's independent patronage of Savage and other authors.

That Savage and the anonymous author of the pastoral both dedicated their poems to Churchill indicates the relative inferiority of their social class and perhaps explains their careful handling of the class issue. The proliferation of epitaphs indicates that Savage's professed fear that Oldfield would die "undistinguish'd" (Robins *Palmy* 248) might conceal a motivation to enhance his own reputation by coupling it with hers. Oldfield, who supported him in life, might offer him support one last time. He and the anonymous writer of the pastoral might hope their service in Oldfield's memory, would attract Churchill's bounty.

In contrast, the author of the *Authentick Memoirs* dedicates the book to the actor Robert Wilks. This indicates the more populist nature of the audience and that the writer by no means belonged to the most privileged class; this is not surprising since retailing theatre gossip for profit seems an unlikely hobby for the nobility. Significantly then, the interest in eulogizing Oldfield came not only from the aristocratic Whigs, but from others less highly placed. The boundary crossing of the written tributes recapitulates Oldfield's own class-crossing existence.

Most likely written by and for the Whig nobility, epitaphs became a standard feature in the "Poetical Essays" section of the *Intelligencer*, but the multiplicity devoted to Oldfield separates her epitaphs from later effusions and serve as another indication of how the Whigs, who accepted Oldfield into their fold, thought of her. Anonymous, but likely from different hands, the five vary in length, language, and skill. All praise her but differ in locating the source of her merit. References to praise and/or applause figure largely in the four verses which celebrate her public career. Although her beauty and other feminine qualities are sometimes mentioned, her profession rather than her gender remains the focus. Without dedications, and with less reference to class, these seem less exercises for profit and more of a fashionable pastime for the highly placed

who regretted a loss. These verses confirm the assimilation of the actress by the privileged class.

Of the three Latin verses, one is a couplet. It reads simply “EXIT Anna Oldfield: Valete & plaudite.” The substitution of a different name could apply this sentiment to any valued performer. The quatrain reiterates praise for her skill as an actor. The third Latin epitaph that begins the page is the longest of all the epitaphs and alone of the three has its English translation printed alongside it. This specifically praises Anne Oldfield’s genius for both tragic and comic parts and ends in audience applause.

The longer of the two English epitaphs strikes an “all the world’s a stage” note: “OLDFIELD lies here retir’d, undrest, The curtain drawn, her part is done.” It ends with a moral that declares the reader lucky if he fares as well in receiving praise after death. The epitaphs imply that being an actress is an honorable profession because they praise Oldfield’s excellence in her profession.

In the fifth epitaph we suddenly leave the stage. The epitaph mentions public reaction more obliquely and balances it by a parallel reference to an offstage life:

Fashioned alike by nature and by art,  
To please, engage, and int’reast ev’ry heart  
In publick life, by all who saw, approv’d;  
In private life, by all who knew her, lov’d.

This verse removes her from the classical tradition of Latin epitaphs and objectifies her in a way consistent with a cultural context of actresses as consumable goods. Yet its affectionate tone hints at an individual’s personal appreciation of an oft seen talent, rather than a conventional display of learning and skill in writing epitaphs. Its appreciation of Oldfield as a woman to interest hearts indicates that the writer saw no contradiction between her womanhood and her profession. The epitaphs confirm the verdict of her burial: the praiseworthiness of her excellence as an actress. Never explicitly addressing class, these epitaphs justify Oldfield’s elevation while minimizing

the barrier crossing involved. The verses avoid the possible disturbance such unusual class mobility might cause, relegating it to the unremarked and unremarkable.

As an actress and the subject of these epitaphs, Oldfield attained an unusual literary prominence for a woman. Kate Lilley discusses how male elegists minimized the threat of woman-as-subject by depicting them as unique exceptions to their gender (73–74). The extravagance of the praise in the elegies about Anne Oldfield may indicate a similar rhetorical strategy. Lilley also problematizes references to gender-linked adjectives and virtues, arguing that the elegies of female writers hide the actual achievements of these women. *The Death of Calista* partially adopts this tactic, but the other long poems abound in specificity about her career. In fact, since the elegists used the career motif to justify Oldfield's social rise (however obliquely), the names of highly born fictive characters could display Oldfield through a prism of her well-born virtuous roles and obscure her origins.

Not everyone agreed that Oldfield's merits set her apart from other women of her background. Although the clergy acceded to the burial request, they later refused permission for a monument. Attitudes may have changed between the two requests; the clerical authorities involved definitely did. Dean Samuel Bradford granted permission for her interment, and the Abbey's prebendary Doctor Barker dryly commented that he buried her very willingly and with the greatest satisfaction (Gore-Browne 187). But in 1736 the proposal for a monument went before a new Dean, Joseph Wilcox, who shared neither his predecessor's tolerance nor the prebendary's sense of humor. He refused even to put the matter to a vote in the Chapter. The Chapter, jealous of their prerogatives, voted against it anyway. Perhaps these gentlemen felt that Oldfield had advanced quite far enough already in her admission to the Abbey.

Two notable exceptions to the literary outpouring of praise clearly disapproved of the honor already accorded the actress. These literary reactions go right for the body

and most directly describe her burial. The most famous of these, which contains a quote commonly associated with Oldfield's death, is Alexander Pope's nasty rhyme about Oldfield's burial apparel. In his satirical survey of how people of different conditions meet death according to their "ruling passions," his depiction of Oldfield as "poor Narcissa" (her character's name in Cibber's *Love's Last Shift*) typifies the entire passage which portrays her as urging "Betty" (Oldfield's companion Margaret Saunders) to array her nicely for burial. The vanity indicated by the cognomen persists to the end and limits her concerns about the hereafter to her appearance in her coffin.

Other than Pope's cynical outlook (amply illustrated by the full poem), why this diminishment of Oldfield? As a lifelong Tory, Pope had every reason to denigrate the Whig's great star as frivolous and unworthy of admiration and respect. That Pope fixed on vanity as Oldfield's weakness locates her offense in a stereotypical gender characteristic, reinforced by the accepted notion that actresses revel in the public display required by their profession. Because of this, Pope's resentment of Oldfield's advancement seems to return to the class question once more. As a Tory, Pope resented Oldfield's social mobility.

When Pope mentions the fabric of Oldfield's burial clothes, the words that Pope invents for Oldfield may tell us more about his concerns than hers. Under the guise of rebuking vanity, he challenges Oldfield's right as a commoner to the more exclusive grave garments of linen (rather than the plebian wool). The garments also evoke her physical body, a more vulnerable target than her fame.

The second writer also located the crux of Oldfield's offense in her actress body. At a guess, another Tory wrote the article that claimed that the very corpses objected to Oldfield's polluting presence. The *Monthly Intelligencer* reprinted a "vision" from the *Weekly Register* describing how the distinguished company in the Abbey requested an "actress" to move farther off, with a poet explaining that "our gallantry and your beauty

die together.” The dialogue ends when the men cease their objections “for fear of being deafen’d with her noise to Eternity.”

This description reduces Oldfield to beauty and excessive speech, both qualities associated with women. Although the writer never mentions class, I infer that the references to her profession also refer to her lowly origin. Oldfield’s burial place creates this disturbance, but Oldfield was not the first woman buried in the Abbey, merely the first unmarried actress. Since the writer does not denigrate the playwright, he (or, less likely in my opinion, she) apparently disapproves of the combination of her womanhood and her profession, which so upsets the order of things in the writer’s mind that Oldfield becomes a clamorous presence, disputing with the dead. If the writer was a Tory, perhaps he felt Oldfield had made too many speeches already and should not be allowed to make a statement with her placement among the hallowed dead. His imagining of the actress body in this distinguished company disturbs him, and he also attacks Oldfield at her most vulnerable point. The writer forced his readers to visualize a decaying corpse instead of remembering a beautiful woman.

So did this unflattering portrait and the lack of a poetic memorial enforce Oldfield’s relegation to the posthumous obscurity usual to her rank? It seems unlikely. There in the Abbey she remained, in the exalted company of bishops and poets. Satirists failed to shift her one inch from her honored resting place. Somehow society needed her there more than they needed her expunged.

Other corpses that changed British society fared much worse. Charles II had Oliver Cromwell, Puritan opponent of theatre and monarchy, disinterred from the Abbey. Compared to Anne Oldfield’s complex signification, the meaning of Cromwell’s fate reads easily enough. Treason must be punished and must be seen to be punished. The minor detail of prior death did not hinder the required drawing, quartering, and head-spiking. Under no circumstances could the regicide be permitted to remain in the

hallowed precincts of the Abbey. But reasons of state never demanded the expulsion of an English actress.

Since the conditions of employment and the reputation of the actress differed little if at all from those in France, the difference in burial seems all the more striking. The relatively low profile of the Church of England explains why Oldfield's corpse suffered no indignities but not why it was honored. Fyvie's account bids us consider the times in "estimating her private character" (57). Her contemporaries considered that the social position of her lovers reflected well on her, and praised her constancy. As Straub argues, this class-based justification forgives Oldfield's sexuality because she and her sexuality were possessed by gentlemen (92–93). In a society beginning to shift its boundaries, Oldfield crossed an important class border. This highly visible move by a popular actress risked jeopardizing the already weakened stratification of British society.

The English church's rejection of its Roman Catholic past included the rejection of canon law and its traditional exclusion of the actress body, although the issue apparently surfaced in the preparations for Oldfield's funeral. In this case, religion yielded to a more pressing cultural need. The emergence of the actress represents a glaring discontinuity, another type of "forgetting" (Roach 75) set alongside Betterton's acts of surrogation and remembrance. Oldfield's burial gives the actress the stature of an honored member of society, creating a tradition where none existed before. Westminster Abbey represents the best of the past and the interment of an actress adds that profession to the past.

As recently as the Restoration, actresses changed the traditions of the English stage, and in the subsequent Augustan era, an Anne Oldfield found herself valued as a popular promulgator of political ideas. Given this prominence in a patriarchal culture that allowed no previous public professions for women, the actress could have caused great social disruption. Instead, the rites given to Oldfield and other actresses



established the actress as a social institution. If dead actresses rated the royal treatment, the admiration given living actresses could be accepted as their due and not a threat to the proper ordering of society.

Admitting Oldfield to the highest level of society in death legitimated her life of boundary crossing. The threat of the speaking woman, the woman who existed both as herself and another (stage character), could be neutralized by an act of acceptance that could not be abused by the silenced recipient. The actress whose class and gender conflicted with her public presence could be forgotten. In death, the society could create a narrative casting her as the latest follower in an honored artistic tradition of theatre performance. Oldfield's class and gender could be subsumed in her cultural function as an artist.

The aristocracy used Oldfield to help start what they hoped would be a new stabilizing tradition and continued to resort to this same solution with other actresses of this period. Without the clerical bar to burial that French actresses faced, English actresses could be buried without renouncing/denouncing their talent. English actresses, though not exempt from other forms of ecclesiastical prejudice, faced no definitional exclusion from Christianity. Indeed, for a brief period, from 1710 to 1785, Westminster Abbey welcomed the bodies of actors and actresses. Actresses buried in the Abbey's cloisters included Anne's onetime rival Mrs. Bracegirdle (1748) and Susannah Cibber, actress-wife of Oldfield's devoted playwright Colley Cibber ("Mrs. Oldfield outdid her usual out-doing"), who was interred in 1766.

Yet, after the eighteenth century, actor representation in the Abbey decreased sharply. Actress bodies went to other destinations for their eternal rest. Although the most impressive of actress memorials in the Abbey, the statue of Sarah Siddons, came after this period, her body lies elsewhere. The twentieth century marked an official separation between actors and the Abbey, and St. Paul's church in Covent Garden

became known as “the actors’ church,” as it continued to accumulate actor memorials in a location far removed from the prestigious “Poets’ Corner” in the Abbey.

Several factors may explain this shift. The English church, after its turbulent commencement and the Puritan disruption of the interregnum, settled into its own codified system. Actresses also became less of a phenomenon; there were simply more of them. Their place in the social system became less fluid, more fixed. No longer a novelty, actresses followed an actual rather than an imagined tradition. Possibly as the church became more established, it no longer needed or permitted the ambiguously powerful corpses of actors in its most honored spaces. Alternatively, or in addition, the nobility ceased, through inclination or inability, to push for the inclusion of actresses among the most honored dead. Perhaps as class boundaries weakened, marrying actresses became simpler and burying them became less important. By the twentieth century, both nobility and the monarchy had diminished in cultural influence.

In Westminster Oldfield lay not only with past leaders of the nation, but those who shaped the culture. This included literary lights like Congreve and Thomas Betterton, the first actor buried there. But such exaltation of the stage was hardly general, nor was it usually extended to women. In the period immediately following the Restoration, the status of both the relegitimized stage and the newly sanctioned actress rose to unprecedented heights. The relative obscurity of the burials for the actresses that followed perhaps indicated a decreased prominence of actresses in the cultural conversation. When prologues and epilogues went out of favor, actresses lost the opportunity of the direct addresses and merged with their characters. No longer were actresses the only women with public voices. Eventually more professions became accessible to women, and even direct participation in politics became possible.

My attempt to find significations for a plaque now almost worn away and bones long since crumbled into dust, rests on the unalterably elevated social status the burial gave Oldfield. Religion, sex, and politics also played out in the final rituals for Anne

Oldfield, but ultimately the social containment and assignment of this new type of creature, the actress, dominated other considerations.

Oldfield's burial represented a cultural decision to assist rather than resist the social rise of a celebrated actress. The posthumous classification of Oldfield as a genius allowed for a limited exception to class divisions while preserving the essentials of social order. This redefining narrative allowed the Whigs to acknowledge Oldfield's social versatility without embarrassment to themselves. In this account her talent (rather than the artificiality of the class structure or the uncontrollable vagaries of sexual liaisons) explained her ascension through the ranks of English society. The celebration of the actress body thus became a helpful confirmation of its exceptional nature rather than a indication of unstable categories. Therefore the Whigs could comfortably reward her personal and political loyalty, all the more easily since a dead woman could take no advantage of their generosity. As France headed for revolution, England found a source of stability in the unlikely site of actress burial.

### Chapter Three: Sarah Bernhardt's Photo Finish

Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) sought what she could never achieve in her lifetime: the position of a famous dead actress. This study brings together biographical details with an analysis of her career choices to show her conscious, active control of death imagery as the basis of her public representation. Scholars have documented Bernhardt's self-promotion, her repertoire of dying characters, and the death-related objects she collected. But no one has synthesized these elements as a means of examining Bernhardt's quest for celebrity. Consequently, studies to date also slight the importance of the press in Bernhardt's quest. I argue that Bernhardt's preoccupation with death and the attempts of the press to write her narrative continually collided throughout her career. Therefore, the public reception of her burial moment may be viewed as both self-theatricalized image and media creation.

This chapter documents the give-and-take between Bernhardt and the press. As with the institutions discussed in prior chapters, the press had a vested interest in rewriting the actress death narrative. As visible women outside the private sphere, actresses give cultural entities the opportunity to publicly evaluate women. An actress death provides the occasion for an institution to present a judgment as a true narrative. If this narrative prevails, then it becomes a cultural memory that reinforces the values of the authoring power.

As an actress, Bernhardt sensed the symbiosis of theatre and death that underlies the Cixous phrase: “for the story to start the woman must die” (13). Bernhardt wove theatre and death in an inseparable web that started with her own imagined death and spiraled into the burial moment. The growth of the newspaper industry proved crucial to Bernhardt's public imagining of her death/apotheosis narrative. A tracing of Bernhardt's self-reported and press-reported image from the beginning of her career through her funeral and beyond reveals how Bernhardt appropriated the images of death already in the culture and performed the role of dead actress both in her plays

and in daily life to ensure the perpetuation of her image. I also note how death figured in all of Bernhardt's artistic works, including those given little attention in previous studies of the actress. Her forays into sculpture provide especially suggestive new examples of the ways in which death shaped her creativity and how her activities fed into a new media-created celebrity culture.

Bernhardt's conscious choice of the dead actress image emerged from her unique historical moment. She took advantage of the cultural preoccupations of her time (with death and news) to carve a niche in the popular culture and in the public memory. Bernhardt once said, "Before my death I have become a legend," (Knepler 256). This self-assessment indicates that Bernhardt thought of herself as a legend, and accordingly not subject to the critiques made on the living. This belief made her objections to critical newspaper reports particularly fierce. While the newspapers wrote of her as a mortal woman who often rebelled against what society deemed a woman's place, Bernhardt placed herself in the pantheon of legends who exist beyond criticism. Although death is the customary prerequisite for that status, I believe Bernhardt hoped to immortalize herself before death.

Nothing better illustrates this active quest for the ultimate passive role than the image of Bernhardt in her coffin. In one celebrated photograph she is dressed in flowing white, lying in her coffin edged by flowers, a beatific semi-smile on her face, arms crossed over her chest—a lovely picture of eternal rest. The photographic image gives one last public glimpse of the celebrated dead. But what makes this photograph of Sarah Bernhardt different from other such memorials is that the subject was alive. She staged herself as a dead woman in a deliberate appropriation of the cultural ideal of female passivity. By her actions, Bernhardt became an agent rather than an object in the picture. Her doubleness (dead/alive) in this pose causes the viewer to consciously consider the attraction of the fantasy image of the dead woman.

Bernhardt 's preoccupation with death affected the entire range of her creations and helped generate her celebrity. Not only her famous deathbed scenes, but her sculptures, her writings, and the way she created her own image reveal Bernhardt's belief that the truest art portrayed death. She thought that her representations of death could give her ascendancy over those who sought to define her against her will. Bernhardt contested the "truth" of her actions with the newspapers as she struggled to define herself. Bernhardt simultaneously allied with and contested the press to create the image she hoped would be immortal.

These attempts to rehearse and control her own death narrative set Bernhardt apart from other actresses, and the media recorded this difference. As the press emerged as a primary generator of popular culture in nineteenth-century France, its need for celebrity subjects matched Bernhardt's own need for fame. Her troubled relationship with the media resulted from the conflict between her desire for fame and her need to shape her own image, especially in her efforts to center her activities around the connection she created between her art and death.

As Richard Schickel notes, institutions transform the famous into representations for unstable desire ("inchoate longings" viii), and Bernhardt certainly became a focus for desire in her society. Her image resonated for a wide public. Jib Fowles reasons that when celebrities become significant symbols for society, their death represents a significant loss. As a consequence, the public expects an exciting death narrative (235–236), one that amplifies the symbolic meaning of the deceased. Since death leaves a void rather than an explanation, institutions rush in with an interpretation that frequently valorizes that institution's place in the culture.

The institution of the media invested years in the creation of "Sarah Bernhardt." Her exploits filled columns and boosted circulation. This socially coded Bernhardt, actresses and women, a process continued in the coverage of her death and burial. Unlike Lecouvreur and Oldfield, Bernhardt consciously advanced a competing version

of her own death. Bernhardt wished to transform her death into art, as so often seen in her performances. She tried to escape mortality by repeatedly “dying” and returning phoenix-like in a burst of glory. As Bernhardt strove to transcend her profession, gender, and mortality, the institution of the press served a cultural need to categorize, limit, confine, and define. Yet if Bernhardt had allowed herself to be confined, it would have ended her usefulness to the press, which marketed both morality and titillation in every story.

This struggle between Bernhardt and the press culminated in a frenzy of front page obituaries. Bernhardt became the first actress to die in the full glare of the media spotlight. Bernhardt, an early print celebrity, focused media attention in a novel way. Her death moment thus set the pattern for coverage of subsequent actress death. Actresses of renown (Lecouvreur, Rachel, etc.) who preceded her expired before the banner headline and front page photograph; those who followed could never engender the novelty that made Bernhardt’s demise so newsworthy. Few actresses ever equaled her in publicity and self-promotion, and none equaled or even approached her preoccupation with death which further fueled public fascination.

Bernhardt’s conscious choice to make death part of her public image stemmed in part from life experiences that brought death dramatically close to her. Illness and war helped shape her views on death; Bernhardt reacted to the possibility of death with defiance. She nursed dying friends and family and would perform even if vomiting blood. In 1870 she transformed the Odéon theatre into a hospital ward in the Siege of Paris (Skinner 72). She personally tended the wounded just as she nursed dying family members. Private griefs and personal health struggles became performances of her public image.

Playing dead never meant that Bernhardt avoided conflict; death—and its counterfeit—simply offered an effective vehicle for achieving her aims. She took advantage of women’s limited options for attracting attention—illness, threats of suicide,

and the theatre—which focused attention without challenging the basic patriarchal assumptions of innate female modesty and subservience to male desire. But Bernhardt also invented her own form of subtle rebellion and chose the dead actress image in a defiant spirit. The dead cannot be forced to follow the rules. Bernhardt wanted the iconic status granted the celebrated dead, specifically the adulation given to dead actresses such as Rachel and Adrienne Lecouvreur. She invoked both these women in her writings and performances and made the idea of the dead actress the basis of her own identity, offering it to the eager attention of the public and the press.

French newspapers formed their own identity at this time, as the French press became a capitalistic institution. The power of newspapers as a system of hegemonic structuring tends to hide their influence (de la Motte 1, Terdiman 117). Hunger for profits led the newspapers to combine information and advertisement so that one could not be distinguished from the other (Terdiman 122). This becomes crucial in the Bernhardt narrative where every performance announcement becomes a story and every article an ad for Bernhardt or Bernhardtness.

As the ubiquity of the newspaper increased so did its influence, an influence paradoxically less visible as the paper became part of life's fabric (de la Motte 357). As the nineteenth century progressed, the press in France (and elsewhere) expanded. Émile de Girardin, publisher of *La Presse*, cut the price of his newspaper in half and increased circulation dramatically. A similar rise in popularity occurred in 1863 with the sale of individual copies (previously available only by subscription) of *Le Petit Journal* (de la Motte 354). Terdiman estimates that the total circulation of Paris papers increased four thousand percent from 1830 to 1880 (118). When a freedom of the press law relieved printers from government licensing in 1881, twenty-three newspapers could be bought for a sou. In 1890, there were sixty such newspapers (Schwartz 29–30).



Terdiman follows Lefebvre in arguing that capitalism in the nineteenth century created a new notion of time, a concept of “dailiness” or a “daily” cycle. Terdiman also argues that capitalism created daily newspapers (119–120), and that the daily routine of reading the news created a “seminal cultural discourse” in Paris (de la Motte 365). This discourse created a type of fame not previously possible. Leo Braudy cites the rapid growth of newspapers, magazines, and the development of photography as immense changes in the communication of fame (450), and Fowles notes that these innovations obviated the need for performers to build their reputation by travel over a period of years. Now the image, not the person, could circulate and do so almost instantaneously (29–30). As a more literate populace developed the habit of newspaper reading, they also came to believe the events and people chronicled in the press to be of more importance than those not so distinguished. To be sure, press coverage of Bernhardt increased her potential audience enormously.

Bernhardt quickly became the prototype of the media celebrity. One letter to a newspaper (presumed by Brander Matthews to be written by Henry James) called her the “muse of the newspapers” and, if not the inventor, then the most successful exploiter of the new trade of celebrity (Matthews 100). Gamaliel Bradford noted soon after her death that no previous actress ever received a tithe of the newspaper notice meted out to Sarah (258). The newspaper coverage indicated not just her fame, but signaled a turning point for the print media. The increased hunger for copy (in an age in which newspapers exploded in popularity) created a need for media celebrities who could provide titillating stories to supplement the sometimes pedestrian flow of national and local events. Bernhardt filled this need not only due to her talent, but also because her life provided a never-ceasing source of stories. Her illnesses, her willingness to expose herself to danger, her risky career decisions, her dramatic roles, mementos mori, and death stunts all provided exciting copy. Like many successful commodities, she stimulated and satisfied a new appetite.

An actress so willing to cast herself in endless real and imagined death dramas should have been the answer to the media's prayers. What then caused the conflict between Bernhardt and the press? What caused/required the criticism that surrounded Bernhardt? Was it her portrayal of the female? Did the epitome of womanhood onstage become its antithesis offstage? I believe the contrary, that Bernhardt identified herself with her roles too closely for comfort. Bernhardt's representation of herself as an immortal (dead) legend challenged and disturbed the standards of society, and her refusal to either conform or disappear when offstage prompted newspaper attacks. Instead of accepting cultural standards, Bernhardt defined woman and actress differently for herself, through her identification with dead actresses.

Bernhardt exempted herself from cultural norms and the newspapers responded. Their attacks allowed the newspapers to champion the cause of morality while cashing in on Bernhardt's notoriety. So what appears at first glance as a harmonious relationship between Bernhardt and the media (in the sense that they contributed to each other's profile and profits) increasingly became a battle for control over her public image. Not surprisingly, Bernhardt noticed and resented the often inaccurate and sometimes vicious way the press interpreted her actions. In no way did Bernhardt show her keen awareness of this contest more than in her attempts to preempt and direct her own narrative of death and remembrance.

Bernhardt's portrayal and commemoration in the press reveals the continuing power of the media in popular culture. The social anxiety never entirely absent from the life of the actress (inseparable from society's attitude towards public women) appears in the press articles that attempted to confine Bernhardt to the restricted venue of the stage, rather than the greater arena of public life. These articles emphasized her physical beauty and womanly grace, while chiding her independent ventures. Yet, by showing that Bernhardt combined transgressive behavior with the qualities of society's ideal woman, these articles helped Bernhardt escape the good/bad woman binary

typical of the era (Buszek 141). Bernhardt's enacted femininity kept her from seeming a bad woman. For one thing, onstage she usually sacrificed herself for some man. This satisfactorily reinstated the status quo. Yet, offstage not even her brief marriage kept her from doing as she pleased. This doubleness defied the usual categories. The media portrayed her as worthy of their notice because of her dramatic talent and womanly virtues, and flawed by her unwomanly flair for offstage dramatics. Her offstage activities offered both news and opportunity for editorializing.

Bernhardt took full advantage of this notice by the press. She also utilized the new technology of photography to consciously shape her narrative. In the nineteenth century, women performers entered popular culture through visual imagery ( Buszek 142). Buszek writes about the women who chose a self-aware sexy pose as their image. One of them called this visual attitude "awarishness." Bernhardt demonstrated the same type of "awarishness" in her performances and poses as self-consciously dead.

Bernhardt developed a highly self-conscious and visual sense of her own death before bringing it to the theatre. Shortly before she started her theatrical career, she became quite ill. As she coughed and spat blood, several doctors pronounced her illness terminal and her life near its end. She embraced this diagnosis and visited the Parisian morgue often to commune with the dead (Skinner 20). According to her granddaughter, Bernhardt requested and acquired her famous coffin at this point. Following her recovery, her family and their friends met (a conference memorably mocked by colleague Marie Colombier and painstakingly described by other biographers) to decide her fate. The influential Duc de Morny suggested the study of acting at the Conservatoire of the Comédie-Française as the best choice. But Bernhardt feared the theatre and preferred the idea of a convent, romantically envisioning a scene of herself dying as a nun in the distant future.

The theatre frightened Bernhardt because she thought acting was a fatal disease. She told her family that she had seen the famous Rachel visiting the convent school Bernhardt attended. The great star of the Comédie-Française appeared so pale and breathless that she frightened the young Bernhardt. A nun added to this negative impression by explaining to her student that Rachel's profession had killed her. So Bernhardt thought of the theatre as a death sentence, and vehemently declared her opposition to a theatrical career (*Life* 32), a conviction which lasted until she saw a performance of *Britannicus* at the Comédie-Française.

According to Bernhardt, this experience of the theatre captured her imagination ("It was, in fact, the curtain of my life which was rising" (35)), and she accepted this alternative (and escape from her unhappy home) to the nunnery. Bernhardt pursued her studies at the school diligently. But she missed out on the top prizes in the major acting competitions. Bernhardt thought this due to her appearance and began to realize that she would need to create a celebrated image to succeed. She attributed her failure to the fact that she did not look like the conventional female beauty. In her second year, Marie Lloyd won the first prize in comedy while Bernhardt took second. Bernhardt writes that she realized Lloyd won for her beauty, not for her acting, and that she never forgot the painful lesson—that the audience expected an ideal appearance (*Life* 58–59). Bernhardt describes at great length how unattractive she looked in the tragedy competition after a hairdresser unsuccessfully tried to straighten what he called "the hair of a blonde negress" and how she cried and further damaged her looks. With her subaltern status thus confirmed, Bernhardt performed poorly. However, as soon as she left the stage she fainted, causing a terrible commotion. Then she felt much better (*Life* 55–56).

While fainting seems a passive response, Bernhardt actually fainted as a form of unpunishable rebellion. Like death, fainting left her seemingly vulnerable and conformable to others' desires; and a woman fainting threatened no one. But a

consciously planned faint or death pose allowed her to pursue her own goals, empowered by the increased attention of those around her. The strength of character with which she adopted her tactics, and her desire for self-designed immortality, made clashes with the representatives of cultural institutions inevitable.

Bernhardt's personality constantly brought her into conflict with the men who ruled the theatre: its managers and critics. These conflicts caused Bernhardt to deviate from the accepted path for an actress in nineteenth-century France. She ignored conventional wisdom right from the start and refused to sleep with the Paris critics before her *début*, an apparently indispensable requisite for actresses who wished to get good reviews (Gold 54). Her granddaughter's memoir states that the newspapers almost entirely ignored her 1861 *début* performances (73), possibly as a result of this refusal.

Despite her faints and her resentment over favoritism toward the fashionably attractive, Bernhardt did not rebel visibly at first. In her *début* she initially fulfilled expectations, though as a pretty young woman, not as an actress. Francisque Sarcey (the only critic to review her performance) praised her physical appearance and clear diction and concluded that for the moment there was no more than that to be said (Pronier 34). Later, the situation reversed itself when the press questioned her womanliness outside the theatre, even as critics praised her acting.

Bernhardt's first public act of rebellion made it into the newspapers, and the publicity severely damaged her career. In her first year as an actress at the Comédie-Française, she brought her little sister Régina to the celebration of Molière's anniversary, resulting in an incident that ended in Bernhardt slapping Mme. Nathalie, a *sociétaire*. When the managing director, M. Thierry, ordered her to publicly apologize, she refused. (Skinner 40). Her rebellion against his authority made her first engagement at the Comédie a brief one and nearly ended her acting career. Bernhardt needed a

power base of her own, an image that could resist the pressure to conform from theatre managers and the press.

Because of the power of the newspaper critics, Bernhardt decided to counter their narrative with her own publicity. Photographs like the one mentioned earlier formed a central part of her strategy. Interestingly, Skinner notes that the teenage Bernhardt posed for an earlier coffin photograph, one much less compositionally compelling than the photograph previously described. This photograph shows a more naïve image, with the pathos inherent in such a young corpse (20). This earlier, less sophisticated attempt demonstrates how Bernhardt continually worked as a self-creating artist on the image of her death, refining and perfecting it over time.

As her fascination with the power of the dead actress image developed, she drew on cultural themes and pictures of the ultimate passive woman—a dead one. The later photograph shows craft and an acute awareness of public appetites. Bernhardt biographer Ruth Brandon describes this coffin photograph as inspired by two pictures popular in Paris at the time, Millais' *Ophelia* and Delaroche's *Le jeune martyr*, both “exhibiting the fashionable decadent view of the ideal woman; passive, submissive and preferably [SIC] dead.” Bernhardt later sculpted her own version of Ophelia, a bas-relief replete with flowing hair and flowers, again, not unlike her coffin photo.

Bernhardt favored tragedy over comedy because tragedy invokes death. The control she always sought came easily as she used her onstage deaths to control the extremes of audience emotions. As a character she died and evoked their fear and pity; as an actress she resurrected herself to receive their applause. In the theatre Bernhardt could constrain death, summon it, or delay it. Bernhardt turned her affinity for the roles of dying women into triumph after triumph. In contrast to Anne Oldfield, who died convincingly, but also played the livelier roles of comedy, Bernhardt almost entirely confined herself to tragedy, cultivating her repertoire of death.

Eventually Bernhardt accumulated a repertoire of immensely successful meditations on mortality. When she needed money, she could always die as Marguerite Gauthier in *La Dame aux Camélias*, a role she first played in 1881. From her Comédie days she played the classic death of Phèdre. Sardou's plays for her resulted in grand, often opera-scale deaths. She herself wrote and starred in the death-centered dramas of *Adrienne Lecouvreur* and *L'Aveu* (about a dying child). In 1916, as a woman in her seventies, she played Marc in *Du Théâtre au Champ d'Honneur*, a short play about a young soldier dying on the battlefield. These roles, and others too numerous to mention here, defined her for the public.

Bram Dijkstra believes Bernhardt seized on a cultural current, a vogue for “. . . the sight of a beautiful woman in love, safely dead . . .” (41). He cites Bernhardt's Ophelia relief as evidence of her consciousness of how much men loved to see a “weak-witted, expiring woman” (45). Georges Clairin's painting “Ophelia Among the Nettles” showed Bernhardt herself as the maddened nymph. Of course, her coffin photo gave men the ultimate thrill of looking at a “dead” yet sexually available woman. Comte Robert de Montesquiou kept a copy of the photo in his Paris apartment, thrilling at least one visitor with its “pathetic loveliness” (qtd in Dijkstra 45). Giving the public what they wanted, Bernhardt also created an image that resonated deeply within herself. She chose the image, performed and perfected it as a way to distinguish herself. This rebellious non-conformist envisioned the passivity of death as an escape or a revenge. Yes, death was a passive position, but not when she chose and controlled the passivity. Death became a tactic as well as a role for her.

Bernhardt often imagined her death as a possible solution to frustration and disappointment. Her dive from a balcony as a five year old may not have been a suicide attempt, but she described it as an act of despair (*Life* 6), and she certainly considered suicide on later occasions. After her fight at the Comédie, she secured a position at the less prestigious Gymnase theatre. Upset when the director of the Gymnase cast her as

a fatuous princess, she went to her friend Mme. Guérard and asked for laudanum. She then decided to run away to Spain instead (*Life* 79).

Such half-hearted gestures at suicide inform the basis of Ruth Brandon's argument that Bernhardt harbored a death-wish, possibly associated with childhood abuse, and that her daring often stemmed from self-destructive urges. Certainly the suicide attempt in 1867 supports this picture of a less than well-balanced personality, overly fascinated by death (121). While most of her contemporaries attributed her coffin, exploits, and choice of death-climaxing plays as clever and/or vulgar publicity efforts, Brandon analyses them as pathological symptoms. Neither explanation gives the full story. Instead, both promotional and psychological motives form part of Bernhardt's active pursuit of the death motif. Only the revelation of her ambition to mythologize herself and control her own destiny makes sense of her extraordinary life.

A love affair with the Prince de Ligne ensued during the rebellious flight to Spain, and on her return to Paris she gave birth to her son Maurice. In another nod to the dramatic, Bernhardt purportedly told her granddaughter (105) that her lover returned to her after Maurice's birth, eager to marry her. But the intervention of a male relative persuaded the young actress to give the prince up for his own good (Verneuil 57). Skinner skeptically points out the resemblance to what happens to Marguerite Gautier, Bernhardt's famous role in *La Dame aux Camélias* (Skinner 50). Whether it happened or not, Bernhardt's readiness to cast herself as the tragic heroine shows her as eager as the press to conflate public role with private life, so long as she dictated the story.

After Maurice's birth, necessity and ambition made a return to the theatre desirable. She joined the Odéon theatre and at last the press began to notice her favorably. In 1869 she scored a triumph as the minstrel Zanetto in *Le Passant*, a transgendered role admirably suited to her slim figure, slightly androgynous appearance (at least as compared to the voluptuous curves of her costar Mme. Agar), and



melodious speaking voice. This established her at the age of twenty-four as one of the best actresses in Paris (Gold 73).

At the Odéon she continued to use death as a tactic to rebel against authority. Before one performance she literally played dead in her dressing room, causing the manager Duquesnel (with whom she had recently quarreled) to announce the cancellation of the performance. Once she achieved her effect, she came to life again to the fury of Duquesnel (Woon 148). The press reported such pranks disapprovingly, which did not discourage Bernhardt.

But the image of death Bernhardt wanted and portrayed was always a theatrical, non-realistic one. She wanted to avoid the ugly, non-idealized aspects of a dead body. Soon after her engagement at the Odéon, Bernhardt arrived for the burial of a former teacher to find a group of frightened young nuns around the corpse of Mlle. de Brabender; the girls were shocked by her toothless and unshaven countenance. Clearly the episode made a deep impression on Bernhardt, who recorded it at length in her memoirs, noting how death gave her friend a "terrible and ridiculous mask" (*Life* 87). This contrasts strongly with her own idealized portrayals of death in photos and on the stage. Bernhardt challenged death with her own creations of it, and death in her personal life inspired her to beguile the public with her art.

The press, Bernhardt's most frequent challenger figured strongly in her career again. After *Ruy Blas*, her second great success at the Odéon, the critics, especially Sarcey, now insisted that the Comédie rehire the rebellious star. According to Mme. Berton, Bernhardt told Francisque Sarcey she wanted to become the star of the Comédie-Française (Woon 190). Whether she requested help or not, Bernhardt knew that no French actress could become legendary without triumphing at the Comédie-Française. Sarcey, now an admirer, gave her his aid and wrote that no one at the Comédie could equal Bernhardt and that hiring her would help the box office (Skinner 89). Bernhardt's roles at the Odéon, which highlighted her beautiful voice and graceful

gestures, had turned her into the "ideal apotheosis of the Frenchwoman" (Brandon 161), pressuring the state-run Comédie to readmit the actress.

Eager for apotheosis though Bernhardt was, she never behaved like the ideal Frenchwoman as described in the newspapers. Despite her contract and accusations of ingratitude, Bernhardt decided to leave the Odéon immediately for the better pay and recognition of the Comédie-Française. The Odéon's managers brought a lawsuit against her for leaving (Aston 10), and the newspapers eagerly reported on all of these events.

At the Comédie-Française, the manager Perrin nicknamed her "Mademoiselle Revolte" (*Memoirs* 250) because their frequent disagreements. To what extent she consciously involved the press in her rebellion remains unclear. In her autobiography, she acknowledges the truth of some reports but denies speaking with reporters. At this time of concentrated public attention on Bernhardt, her possession of a coffin became publicly known. According to Bernhardt, she slept in it while watching over her dying sister Régina because there was no space in the bedroom for another bed. Her manicurist saw her napping there and ran out screaming. The manicurist made the story public.

In this highly original way, Bernhardt introduced herself lying senseless in a coffin into the public consciousness. It does not matter if she participated in spreading the story or not, because she welcomed the publicity. Indeed, she took pains to circulate the image. Gold and Fizdale write that Bernhardt capitalized on the publicity by having Melandri take the famous coffin photograph. Sold as postcards, they made a tidy sum for the photographer and his model (113–114).

What her sister Régina, dying of tuberculosis at the age of eighteen, thought about the coffin is less certain. Marie Colombier writes that it tormented her, and that the doctor finally asked Bernhardt to remove it. However, when Régina died, Bernhardt recounts that the undertakers sent for two hearses because there were two coffins in

the room. The press criticized Bernhardt severely for the latter incident (*Life* 184). At the funeral, Bernhardt wept so much that a journalist remarked, "It's not a funeral; it's a première" (Gold 115).

While the reporters reproved her sickroom and funeral manners, the critics represented Bernhardt as the ideal woman; they conflated the woman, the actress, and her role in their criticism. After her first return performance at the Comédie (in *Mademoiselle de Belle-Isle*) critic Théodore de Banville praised her appearance in detail and wrote "the character of the actress is no less curious than that of the woman" whose voice and diction he commended (Richardson 48). Other reviewers followed this reductive model, and reviews of Bernhardt typically drew as much attention to her womanliness as to her acting. The critics established Bernhardt's appearance onstage as the sign for woman, and defined Woman as consisting of beauty and gesture, perhaps voice. After she played Phèdre, critics wrote about her "spellbinding femaleness," and Jules Lemaître raved about the way in which she put "her sex" into the role (Skinner 106–107). Since Phèdre dies, these men implicitly reiterated the notion that the ideal woman is a dead one.

Nineteenth-century gender anxiety also appeared in the persistent images of fatal women (the dark shadows of the love-killed heroines) in the art and literature of this period. The reverse side of the dying woman that Bernhardt played so well is the woman who brings death. Bernhardt brought that double edge to many of her creations. Empress Theodora, Queen Cleopatra, and the efficient Tosca (created for her by Sardou) all bring men to their doom before their own demise. These fictions repeat the message that legendary dead women wield power.

In his study of *femme fatale* art in the late nineteenth century, Patrick Bade calls an inkwell Bernhardt sculpted (showing the head of a woman with batwings) a rare instance of a woman artist creating a *femme fatale* image (32). Bernhardt's willingness to create this image (and sculpture as well as drama) reflects the personal rather than

ideological nature of her ambition. Other women artists probably avoided the *femme fatale* image because of its misogynistic undercurrent. Bernhardt apparently cared little about the image of women as a whole. She broke gender barriers, not as a feminist, but because she wanted a destiny not usually allotted to women. Later, when she played Hamlet, Pelleas, or L'Aiglon, she wanted the powerful dying roles to enhance her reputation; any gender gains were incidental.

Although Bernhardt and her critics agreed that she personated death far more than her colleagues, they differed radically on what such death-playing meant. Critical attention often focused on the convincing submissiveness and grace of her female roles. Press descriptions stressed the passive femininity conferred by her convincing embodiments of such roles as the hapless love suicide Dona Sol (*Hernani*) and the dying Marguerite Gauthier (*La Dame aux Camélias*). I believe Bernhardt herself saw no contradiction between professing submission onstage and defiance (*quand même*) off, as in both instances she remained the legendary star actress. This was so in the newspapers, where Bernhardt's enactment of seemingly death onstage constantly conflicted with her active and frequently transgressive life offstage, as the enactment of femininity so prized by her male admirers obscured a far more complex personality. Critics focused on the passive body, while Bernhardt thought of the reverence and fame accorded a legendary actress. Since she strove for reverence and fame rather than elevation as an exemplar of her gender, only her stage persona ever conformed to the passive female archetype assigned by the press.

As befitted a once-and-future legend, she repeatedly crossed the line of traditional behavior. When not performing she complained of boredom and sought other outlets for her energetic and adventurous nature. In an incident that again brought her into conflict with the press, Bernhardt took part in a balloon ascension. Like many of her offstage actions, journalists characterized this as an unbecoming publicity stunt (and reported it in detail). The journalist Albert Milhaud described Bernhardt as a spirit, an

aerial and ideal goddess, but objected to her ballooning, her sculpting and other "eccentricities" that he thought unworthy of the actress. Bernhardt responded with a letter whose first phrase translates as "Your good will toward the artist prompts me to defend the woman" (Gold 145). Bernhardt knew that the press thought they could define womanhood and consequently attempted to offer her own version. She later amplified her response by writing an amusing yet death-tinged account of the balloon ride.

Journalists discussed and condemned Bernhardt's unfashionable thinness, her unusual hair, and her unconventional friends. In her letter to *Le Figaro* Bernhardt denied the more outrageous rumors but defended her other "eccentricities" by questioning why they should bother anyone so long as her acting did not suffer. She demanded the right to live as she chose.

Was Bernhardt disingenuous in this letter? Was this a challenge to the male journalists to explain why her behavior bothered them? The freedom Bernhardt felt to behave as she chose rather than as they wanted tapped into social anxiety about the "modern woman" (Gilman 205) which surfaced in these criticisms. Dijkstra goes so far as to say that in this period men waged a cultural war against women (vii). Bernhardt's submissive women and *femmes fatales* (onstage) brought masculine hopes and fears thrillingly to life. But offstage the journalists took Bernhardt's activities as a challenge to a constant, unchanging sign of "woman."

Bernhardt certainly knew and may even have depended on the fact that her offstage actions would be reported. Her choice to play dead offstage, or to take a risky trip in a balloon could be counted on to encourage the public to take an interest in her onstage deaths as well. How freely did Bernhardt choose? How deliberate were her social transgressions?

I contend that Bernhardt made deliberate, conscious choices. The self-consciousness of her autobiography, the care evinced in everything from clothing to

role selection, the shrewdness noted by her biographers, all combine to convince me that she deliberately battled for her image with all comers and that she crossed boundaries in full awareness of their existence. She simply decided that, as a legend, the restrictions for her did not apply.

At this early stage, she met plenty of resistance from those who believed otherwise. Perrin, the manager of the Comédie-Française, criticized Bernhardt for the balloon trip and tried to fine her for literally crossing a boundary: leaving Paris without his permission. Bernhardt contested his attempts to circumscribe her activities as adamantly as she rejected journalistic advice; she cut short his scoldings by threatening to quit.

Bernhardt defied the paternalistic decrees of the theatre managers and seemed to welcome the ensuing media outrage. Bernhardt notes that the Parisian press usually sided with Perrin and even calls the newspaper *Le Figaro* the mouthpiece of the Comédie. She believed representatives of the theatre instructed its critic Johnson not to praise her London performances because the London audiences received her too enthusiastically (*Life* 217). The Parisian papers echoed Perrin and accused her of “eccentric” behavior, irritating her until only the entreaties of Perrin and her colleagues kept her from quitting immediately (*Life* 225).

Both the London and Paris newspapers focused not on Bernhardt’s performances in London, but on interesting gossip about her activities. Parisians enjoyed the spectacle of Bernhardt’s behavior just as they enjoyed going to the morgue. Newspapers made her activities part of daily life but also framed and confined the gossip for their readers. Perhaps the censorious reaction of the reporters came from a perception of Bernhardt as unconfined and as dangerous as the cheetah the actress purchased for her household while in London. Of course, Bernhardt purchased her wildlife in full awareness of the impact on her public image. Perhaps she was giving the press fair warning.

With the public support of the newspapers, Perrin and the committee of the Comédie-Française continued their attempts to discipline Bernhardt. Perrin, as was customary, decided which roles Bernhardt would play. As was not customary, Bernhardt rebelled. In April, 1880, Perrin's choice of an unsuitable vehicle (*L'Aventurière*) with inadequate rehearsal time resulted in devastatingly bad reviews.

Actresses of the time followed the dictates of managers and critics. In pursuit of celebrity power, Bernhardt rejected this ubiquitous molding of the actress, which Gail Marshall likens to the fashioning of the Galatea myth. Bernhardt resisted the Pygmalion critics just as she resisted the conventions that stressed the actress's appearance above talent or experience (Davis 48) and contributed to this creator/object relationship. With her death motif, she invented a self presentation that suited her unfashionably thin and spiritual appearance. Marshall notes Bernhardt as an exception to her Galatea thesis, describing Bernhardt as a rarity in this period, a self-sculpting artist (Marshall 115–116).

Given her resolve to determine her own destiny, *L'Aventurière* proved a career turning point. Sarah Bernhardt could not regulate the comments of the press, but the reporters could not force her to play a part she did not wish to play (non-metaphorically at least). In that regard, the Comédie wielded greater power over her. Like the journalists, the committee of the Comédie wished Bernhardt's private life unremarked and unremarkable. Unlike the journalists, the Comédie could and did punish her offstage behavior by its assignment of her onstage roles. The leaders of the Comédie-Française complacently believed that its centuries-long preeminence as the home of the finest actors in France gave it absolute power in its governance. Sociétaires followed the rules.

Perrin's insistence on this uncongenial role for Bernhardt caused her to break with the revered institution of the Comédie-Française for good. Treated like a poorly behaved child, she could either leave or conform to the management's wishes. Gold

and Fizard credit Bernhardt as the instigator of these events, alleging that she stage managed the whole event deliberately in order to breach her contract (so she could accept the offer of a London tour).

Whether or not she planned the entire affair, at this point in her career Bernhardt decided she could do better on her own. She had reached the pinnacle of her profession in France, but at the Comédie she had to share the spotlight. Perrin clearly would not elevate her above the other sociétaires. She intended to be a legend. So she left the Comédie-Française. Seizing control of her own story, she sent copies of her letter of resignation to *Le Figaro* and *Le Gaulois* (Gold 157).

This resignation shocked the French public (as represented by the French press), since all actresses aspired to a position in France's national theatre and few achieved it. Actresses patiently paid their dues to be chosen (unlike Bernhardt who refused to join the London tour unless made a member). Once ensconced at the Comédie, actresses continued to play the roles assigned them until it came time to draw their pensions and fade away. So Bernhardt's decision to leave the Comédie was inevitable. She wanted the power to create a legend, not lifetime security.

In a statement that indicates awareness of her social transgression, Bernhardt claimed that anticipation of the press reaction prompted her final break with the theatre, that she left because she wished to hear all the press "vipers" rattle together at her decision (*Life* 234). The Parisian papers obliged and forecast disaster for Bernhardt after her unprecedented resignation. Remarkably enough, Bernhardt's greatest triumphs still lay before her, in the years when she became free to choose her own repertoire.

As Bernhardt asserted her independence from the entrenched theatrical establishment, the conflict between her and the press intensified. Because her tour to London and a proposed trip to the United States would deprive the French journalists of their regulatory power over her career and image, the Parisian newspapers repeatedly



urged her return to the fold (the Comédie-Française) and predicted dire consequences if she failed to do so. Her social rebellion previously remained within the bounds of the French theatre, but now Bernhardt threatened to escape cultural restrictions entirely and take her newsmaking image with her. From the time of her resignation the Parisian press did their best to fulfill their own dire prophecies by printing inaccurate accounts of her waning popularity and her "failures" while on tour. While the newspapers criticized and penalized her for her decisions, Bernhardt consistently sought fame and remuneration rather than the stability and approval of a conventional career.

Venturing ever further as an independent agent, Bernhardt eventually established her own company and theatre. After running the Théâtre de la Renaissance for several years, she leased the Théâtre des Nations, renaming it the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt, and managed it till her death (Carlson 195–6). This theatre provided a dramatic backdrop for her funeral cortège, a fact noted in her obituaries.

The determination that set Bernhardt apart from her contemporaries and compatriots at the Comédie came from a complex personality, seen at its most intense in her willingness to wage war against the press. The position of embattled outsider came naturally to Bernhardt, as not only the daughter of a foreign (Dutch) courtesan, but of a Jew. Despite her childhood baptism as a Catholic, her Jewish identity remained part of her public persona and a frequent cause of controversy. When the actress Marie Colombier wrote about Bernhardt she not only repeatedly characterized Bernhardt's and her mother's looks as "israélite" and "juif" (5), she also told stories that link Bernhardt's amours with a money hunger stemming from "La Juive" in her (15). Even the book cover represents a caricature of Bernhardt as Jew, a woman with a hooked nose sitting in a star of David.

In "Negotiating the Categories: Sarah Bernhardt and the Possibilities of Jewishness," Janis Bergman-Carton records the anti-Semitism directed against Bernhardt. Unfavorable newspaper articles often attacked Bernhardt for having

stereotyped “Jewish” traits. Yet Bergman-Carton concludes that Bernhardt’s performances problematized the image of the Jewess, and that anti-Semites sought unsuccessfully to contain her in their narrative as a typical Jew. Bergman-Carton highlights their own contradictions of the stereotype, especially the phrase about “her sickly and otherworldly countenance” in a long description by Goncourt quoted by Bournard and Viau as “proof” that Bernhardt is “a Jewess and nothing but a Jewess.” The “countenance” phrase counteracts the rest of the paragraph by transferring Bernhardt from the material to the spiritual realm. Just as her dying roles freed her from the good/bad binary in the press, the image of death here helps Bernhardt evade categorization in the negative narratives of others.

Not surprisingly, Bergman-Carton concludes that “there is no essential Sarah Bernhardt” (63). But who constructed the identity that the world knew by that name? Did the press or Bernhardt play the larger role? Was it a joint venture? Bernhardt’s strong will and daring led her to adopt the motto “quand même” (roughly translated as “no matter what”), which she justified by her fearlessness, almost amounting to courtship, of death. Her self-conscious strategies to attain the power of celebrity as a legendary dead actress contrast sharply with the simpler goal of the press to sell newspapers. The press seems more reactive, waiting for opportunities to exploit a performance or action for its sales potential.

The two agendas could coincide, for Bernhardt often cooperated with the press to get her name before the public. And the newspapers needed to create stars for their stories. Press notice brought financial opportunity. Colombier’s doubtless exaggerated and possibly fabricated stories aside, Bernhardt did acquire and disburse vast sums. She spent lavishly and constantly needed more money. Her family also frequently needed monetary assistance—first her mother and sisters, and in later years her son and, while they lived together, her husband. This provides one reason for her world

tours and subsequent appearances in American vaudeville; these appearances paid much more than she could ever earn at the Comédie-Française.

Death also maximized her financial opportunities. Public approbation of her skill in tragic deaths became a constant early in her career and must have affected the actress's decisions. Once free to choose her own repertory, her plays varied greatly in quality but almost always contained a powerful deathbed scene. Although not every play achieved resounding success, her instinct for what suited her acting style served her well, and what suited her was usually a death scene. The press reacted to her performances and not the plays, few of which survived her. Sardou worried needlessly about competing with Shakespeare, because no one cared about his *Cléopâtre*, only about how Bernhardt played the title role (Carlson 193).

While Bernhardt pursued the power offered by fame, her contemporaries criticized her supposed taste for notoriety for its own sake. Colombier titled her exposé *Sarah Barnum*, mocking her subject's suspect skill at publicity. Like the great showman P. T. Barnum, Sarah Bernhardt was always news. Like Barnum, Bernhardt saw the value of publicity in the tickets it could sell. Unlike Barnum, she believed her product (Sarah Bernhardt) to be as unique as advertised. Bernhardt consciously tried to shape news/advertisement of herself, to control her own image and its ultimate fate in death. While the media sometimes attacked her as foreign or extravagant, it was not those attacks but her desire to control the narrative of her life and death that led to most of her conflicts with the press.

Bernhardt became the initiator of the press/actress dynamic that quickly became established. She would do something unusual and the press would report/exaggerate it. Offstage Bernhardt continued to represent death, and these "private" flirtations with mortality quickly became part of her public image. Reporters found Bernhardt's fascination with death a baffling though plentiful source of copy—one journalist calling her coffin the extreme of bad taste (qtd in Skinner 101).

Whether or not Bernhardt deliberately created a spectacle of her life, there is every indication that a spectacle is exactly what the press and its readers wanted. In *Spectacular Realities*, Schwartz comments on this time and the transformation of reality that the Paris newspapers created, as news items shared space and often narratives with serialized novels. The Parisian press created a common ground, one that served the consumer culture as it united its readers in a collectivity of spectators (43–44). Stories about Bernhardt provided the sensational material that readers wanted while claiming the newsworthiness of truth. Approving or disapproving, the press chronicled her life so thoroughly that the thousands who came to her funeral felt they knew this woman.

The same drive that kept her advancing her self-representation led Bernhardt to other artistic activities also reported by the press. The self-sculpting artist expanded to sculpting in a conventional sense, and displayed her work at an exhibition in London. Bernhardt kept the death motif in her major group, a Breton fisherwoman holding the body of her dead son in a work titled “Après la Tempête.” But the critics showed less interest in the work and its themes than in the artist herself.

Critics naturally foreground the body as an indispensable instrument of the actor's art. But, significantly, in newspaper accounts of Bernhardt, the scopophilic concentration on the body occurs even in the context of her figurative art. The press continued to advance its own version of Bernhardt, opposing her efforts to create an image for herself. The studio setting is new, but the contest of power between Bernhardt and the press over whose definition will prevail remains the same. The writer of an article on the London exhibition begins with an excerpt from the Paris theatre critic Sarcey: “the prettiest thing in the atelier is its mistress.” Sculpting, Bernhardt created artworks clearly separate from her own person in a way that her acting did not allow. But Sarcey chooses his own picture, uses the word “prettiest” to foreground her femininity, and fixes her as the object in the frame.

The anonymous English writer who quoted this passage in *The Times* echoed and extended Sarcey's view, for after praising Bernhardt's art, he (a gender assumption based on the writer's prescriptive framing of the female performer) advises her to confine herself to acting. He wants her to make "pictures and statues of herself before the looking-glass" ("Exhibition"). In other words, a woman's art consists always of displaying herself. What seems odd is the writer's view that Bernhardt could not sculpt her art and herself simultaneously, which is exactly what she did.

In fact, even Bernhardt's studio attire was an attempt to determine how her body would be read. Her white silk pantsuit from Worth paradoxically drew attention to her womanly form and unconventionally negated it by the masculine connotation of trousers. Bernhardt, no stranger to controversy and contradiction, both sought and complained of publicity in the press, and her artistic garb attracted both positive and negative press attention. Bergman-Carton notes that this outfit and Bernhardt's other "gender play" activities, such as her enthusiastic participation in active sports, marked Bernhardt in public print as "*la nouvelle femme*," (59) provoking widespread gender anxiety.

Bernhardt deliberately incorporated the cultural types of the dead woman and the new woman in her image. On stage, she introduced another fashionable view of woman, the female hysteric. Michelle Perrot notes that Bernhardt observed patients from the Salpêtrière psychiatric hospital in creating her roles. Dr. Jean Pierre Charcot used the "fits" of his female patients to illustrate his lectures on hysteria, and Bernhardt imitated their gestures in performance (Perrot 630–631). This referenced a source of gender anxiety and cultural fascination, turning aberrant behavior into an asset.

Like Lecouvreur and Oldfield, Bernhardt pushed the boundaries of the permissible and expanded the realm of the possible for an ever-growing public. Presenting alternative choices to the conventional lifestyle could be considered a celebrity's job (Fowles 167). Cultures give famous people leeway to experiment,

especially with gender roles and sexual behavior. As in Bernhardt's case, the media encourages celebrity experimentation with obsessive coverage.

In her contesting narrative, Bernhardt created a legendary actress completely devoted to the theatre, a passionate woman willing to die to prove herself (*Life* 181). Her writings both illuminate her beliefs and serve her public image. She even wrote a dramatic adaptation of the life of Adrienne Lecouvreur, the French actress most famous for her dramatic death. She had already triumphed in Scribe's and Legouvé's version, once a vehicle for another dead actress, the legendary Rachel. That she felt the need to interpret the story in her own words shows the centrality of its theme in her thoughts. By creating a role so close to her own biography, Bernhardt explicitly identified herself as a famous dead actress.

*Adrienne Lecouvreur* (1907) provides clues to Bernhardt's attitudes about art and death. Bernhardt personalizes the story by starting the narrative with a jealous sister, Marguerite. Since this character receives no emphasis in earlier fictions, it is possible that Bernhardt used her art to work out some of the conflicts within her own family and her troubled relationships with her two younger sisters. She sponsored Jeanne in a theatrical career, despite Jeanne's lack of aptitude for acting and her drug addiction. Her little sister Régina (who lived with her) frequently behaved outrageously and became a prostitute before her early death from tuberculosis (Gold 87). In the drama, the attitude of Adrienne's jealous sister changes from spiteful malice to remorseful penitence—historically, Lecouvreur's sister did not repent (Sorel 12)—a penitence Bernhardt might well have wished for in her own siblings.

Even if Bernhardt did not strongly identify with Lecouvreur, we may examine her speeches in the play as indications of the playwright's views about death, art, love, and life. If, as the parallels between her life and the story indicate, she felt kinship with “douce Adrienne” (dedication), the speeches of the doomed actress become even more important in an analysis of Bernhardt's self-creation as the actress who knew how to

die. Bernhardt prolongs Adrienne's death for an entire act. The duchesse tells Adrienne she has been poisoned in Act V, scene 6. The play then continues with Act VI. This act consists of nine scenes of Adrienne dying with various combinations of supporting characters. Successively, she bids farewell to her friends, confronts a priest, says goodbye to her lover, and makes one final deathbed speech.

Of all these deathbed moments, the scene with the priest may be the one that most clearly expresses what Bernhardt felt was central to the piece, judging from the length of her speech and its relevance to her own life. In scene 8, Bernhardt imagines Lecouvreur defying the priest who tells her she has led a guilty and scandalous life. First Adrienne turns the tables by criticizing her lover's mother, and the priest tells her, "Taisez-vous" (shut up). But she refuses to be silenced. When the priest demands that she renounce her love and "abominable" profession, she retorts that her art and her love, far from being sins, are the wings that will bear her up to God.

Adrienne parts with her lover Maurice de Saxe much more expeditiously, as he appears in the next and final scene along with the rest of her admirers/mourners (including d'Argental and Voltaire). Bernhardt devotes only a few lines to Maurice in this scene, in which Lecouvreur describes the physical sensations she feels as she dies. At the end she once again invokes her fidelity to her love and her art and pronounces, "Dieu soit juge!" (218).

Other versions of Lecouvreur's story focus on the famous love affair. Bernhardt chose instead to make Lecouvreur's death the high point of the drama, with the climax of the piece occurring when Lecouvreur announces her decision not to renounce her profession. Bernhardt may have chosen this plot structure to make an explicit connection between the art of acting and death. Adrienne clings to her art while dying, and she explicitly states that acting will redeem her death (lift her to God). Bernhardt's own life combined these tropes of "death" and "actress," and the play echoes her decision to embrace the "deadly" vocation of actress.

Bernhardt's decision to script her own version of the legend also fits in with her refusal to let the press write her life and death narrative. Instead she wrote herself into history as the most famous dead actress of her time, crowning herself as Lecouvreur's successor in the fatal struggle to create theatre. At the same time, Lecouvreur's death scene dramatizes the idea that being an actress confers an essential quality that outlasts life. Theatre may kill you, but your death will be glorious.

In her memoirs and her treatise on theatre, Bernhardt gives a few other indications of how she may have viewed herself as a woman. However, Bernhardt wrote with the assumptions of her time, not ours. Whereas a feminist might concentrate on Bernhardt's struggle with gender expectations and how she viewed her iconoclastic power, Bernhardt recounts her stage triumphs and her struggle to force the press to report her life accurately. In feminist terms, she demands the subject position in her own story. Yet she does so without ever acknowledging the gender bias that underlies the contest.

An interesting exception is Bernhardt's response to her friend Girardin's advice to be more yielding, docile, and sociable. Although she agrees to try to be more sociable she responds that she will never be yielding or docile but will always be making "risky jumps" (*Memoirs* 232). This sounds like a rejection of conventional womanhood on her part, although the conversation never mentions gender explicitly.

Bernhardt's autobiography gave her a chance to shape her image directly, unmediated by the press. Autobiographical writings in general present what the authors wish others to know, not searching self-examination. Bernhardt's book in particular avoids painful honesty with its engaging, positive, and light-hearted tone. Her narrative strategy, while certainly self-conscious, is concerned with her activities, not painstaking self-analysis. Indeed, her biographers note the calculated omission of her personal life from the account. So the book tells us little about why she created herself as a



legendary dead actress. The title of her book, *Ma Double Vie* suggests the possibility of a life different from that visible to the public, but the book never reveals one.

In her memoirs, Bernhardt sometimes mentions what she believes to be salient features of her own character, such as her perversity, her love of danger, her superstitions, and her tantrums. Most of these could be construed as cultural signs of woman, but her love of danger comes from the preoccupation with death that permeated her life and career. Other writers focus on her charm, talent, wit, even her publicity seeking. But her willingness to dare death drove her more than any of these. Bernhardt chanced death to get her own way. To make people sorry for upsetting her, she often took risks she calls suicidal; she writes simply: "I am at times very foolish. Why? I don't know how to explain it, but I admit it" (*Memoirs* 255). Bernhardt's flair for the dramatic exceeded the bounds of conventional female behavior, while it bolstered the image of the fatal woman found in the newspapers. In ways even she could not explain, the pursuit of death linked her life to her stage roles. I believe she defied death by coming as close to it as possible, both for the thrill and because she thought only an association with death would allow her image to survive it.

Death and drama were equally central to Bernhardt's self-image. As with death, Bernhardt identified herself closely with drama. In her writing she equates woman and drama. Arguing that drama is essentially feminine, she ascribes to it "faults" for which we blame and indulge women: "To paint one's face, to hide one's real feelings, to try to please and to endeavour to attract attention" (*Memoirs* 328). The reflexive nature of her statement reminds us of how Bernhardt was blamed and indulged by the press; it also stresses her complete identification with the theatre. Bernhardt feminizes actors by the logic of antitheatrical prejudice and, as woman and actress, doubly stigmatizes herself with these cultural criticisms. But she also places herself as an actress at the center of drama, highlighting and legitimizing her efforts to gain attention. Whether publicity ploy

or inner need, she displayed herself as in peril. When not dying onstage, she represented herself as in danger of dying in truth, dramatizing even her real illnesses.

Never far from death throughout her life, Bernhardt continued to die convincingly onstage and to seek out danger offstage. Offstage she underwent the terrifying amputation of her leg (she wrote her doctor she preferred death to immobility). In 1916 she visited the battlefield to entertain the French soldiers. The judging press reacted to this gesture with bemusement. Mme. Dussane, the actress who went with her, said "Paris was skeptical when reading in the papers about her visit" ("Sarah at the Front"). Bernhardt often demonstrated a militant patriotism, probably in reaction to the press attacks against her as a foreigner and a Jewess.

A report in the *New York Times* mentions an incident at the end of her life that both reiterates Bernhardt's attempt at conscious control and the circumstances beyond her control. An article that trumpets "Bernhardt Rallies" describes how through a window opened for fresh air in the sickroom came the sounds of a funeral. Bernhardt supposedly said, "It is not my funeral yet; I will live many years." Despite this resolve, she died the same day the *New York Times* published that report, on March 26, 1923.

At this point only her body and reputation remained. Would the image she crafted be remembered? Or would the press description of a talented publicity seeking oddity persist? The funeral and its coverage would set the tone for all future remembrances and provide the capstone to her career.

As Bernhardt lay in her long-cherished and carefully chosen coffin, she presented a picture that surely recalled the photographs of her death pose. The presence of other actors who rushed from their performances to mourn her also repeated the substance of her prank years earlier. The actors of Paris delayed their own performances that evening, requesting a two-minute silence from their audiences. Then at the end of their shows they gathered the flowers thrown to them and brought them to Bernhardt's bedside.

Bernhardt's three days of lying in state (Rueff 233), while all of Paris mourned and all ranks of society brought her ever more flowers, ended in a funeral procession arranged by the city of Paris. Authorities differ on why no state funeral occurred. The most common explanation given is that certain government officials were out of town at the time of Bernhardt's death. Despite this, it is hard to imagine a procession of greater grandeur than the one that stopped Paris traffic the morning of her burial. Whether Parisians lined up three deep or seven (Verneuil 27), the crowds were huge and emotional. Many cried and some kneeled during the three-hour procession, which included some of the most illustrious people in France. In front of the Theatre Sarah Bernhardt, the procession paused, and showers of flower petals rained down on it from the roof (Gold 330). As the procession passed, the crowds followed, first to the church of Saint François de Sales and then to the cemetery of Père Lachaise (Verneuil 27), staying as close to their idol as they could.

Belle-Ile, where Bernhardt went to rest from her tours and her chosen eternal resting place, never housed her body. She sold her house there five days prior to her death (Woon 345). But the inhabitants of Belle-Ile proceeded to a little fort she loved on the day of her funeral. In the newspaper accounts, the fishers and workers of the island silently tossed camellias and island wildflowers in tribute on the draw-bridge ("Paris a fait d'émouvantes funérailles"). Today the island website shows a picture of Bernhardt, and the museum houses Bernhardt memorabilia.

In the Parisian accounts of the funeral, three newspapers referred explicitly to Bernhardt's wishes for her burial and how the day fulfilled them. Despite this recognition that Bernhardt planned her death, two reporters neglected the scope and long-range vision of that plan. The reporters focused on one limited and recently expressed desire: Bernhardt's wish for flowers at her funeral. Flowers there were in abundance, with an extra car transporting nothing but wreaths. A story in *L'Echo National* starts with a quote

about her wish for “beaucoup des fleurs”; another is headlined “Selon son désir, Sarah Bernhardt a eu des obsèques fleuries.”

One account better expressed Bernhardt’s desires (which certainly went far beyond funeral wreaths). Illustrated by the famous coffin photo and headlined “L’HOMMAGE DE PARIS A SARAH BERNHARDT,” the Paris *Journal* drew attention to Bernhardt’s planning for the event. In the photo caption, the writer identifies the coffin in which she was buried as the same one that she was photographed in years earlier. This subtle acknowledgment of Bernhardt’s long preparation for death also followed in part Bernhardt’s own projected narrative of the event. Unlike most of the press coverage, which buried Sarah in flowers (the headline in *L’Echo* was “Sous les Fleurs”), this photo projected the image that Bernhardt clearly wanted associated with her death.

When Bernhardt’s career began in the nineteenth century, the Western world demonstrated a remarkable taste for morbidity in general and dead women in particular. The Parisian public that crowded the morgue to see the corpses crowded the theatres for Bernhardt’s death scenes, even as they devoured press accounts of the skeleton and coffin in her bedroom. Aware of this death craze and sharing it to an exceptional degree, she also exploited it for publicity purposes. Her self-promotion created contiguous and overlapping Bernhardts, as the actress who died so movingly onstage blended with the real-life woman with a skull on her desk. Bernhardt became a site of morbid fascination. As a commodity, she was perfectly suited to her times.

Although times changed, the idea of dead and deadly women persisted. Bernhardt’s continued fame could be seen as one indicator of this continuing association between women and death. Indeed, Dijkstra argues that the conjunction not only continued but intensified as women became established “scientifically” as a source of social destabilization and physical destruction (*Evil Sisters* 1–4). Nor did this combination disappear as the twentieth century advanced. The waif and “heroin chic” looks, and a 1990s model whose cadaverous appearance (a result of her

chemotherapy treatments for cancer) made her famous, show that the desire to see dying women never went out of fashion. Bernhardt appears as the first in this long line of celebrities, women willing to look dead for the reward of fame. Sadly, Bernhardt's followers lacked her degree of awareness and intentionality, achieving such fleeting glory that I cannot recall their names.

If our continuing fascination with Bernhardt rests on a gynecidal impulse, her intended immortality's unintended consequence may be uses of her story as justification for antiwoman violence. Bernhardt played many roles which glorified the passive woman and demonized the powerful woman, neither of which promote gender harmony or a multivalent approach to gender relations. In that context Bernhardt the archetypal actress becomes Bernhardt the archetype of antitheatrical misogyny, a woman whose drama of death reinforces fears about actress deception. Only analysis of these fantasies deprives them of their power to affect social thought. Therefore, in my reading of Bernhardt's body, I attempt to expose the antiwoman subtext and preserve what remains of Bernhardt's agency.

An attempt to account for so complex a phenomena as Bernhardt's eminence by one factor realigns the existing information, highlighting some areas while obscuring others. This study emphasizes Bernhardt's agency in her image. Bernhardt enjoyed a long and illustrious career in a highly public profession, assiduously covered by the media. But media coverage may seem to reveal all while actually concealing anything outside its frame. Fame, once established, continues to cover the same ground, as books and articles build on each other. In a sense, fame overshadowed the unique personality that attracted all the attention, blurring Bernhardt's unique attributes and reducing her to one essential quality of "actressness." The impetus of fame caused the paradoxical situation that made a very atypical actress an actress archetype, still invoked today.

Despite this celebrity and the numerous writings attesting to it, Bernhardt's own agency as creator of death images, particularly in her writings, has never been studied comprehensively. It was not just a matter of her genius at death scenes but her artistic skill at creating and collecting an environment offstage that encouraged others to visualize her in her chosen role. In her home and in her work she surrounded herself with evidence of mortality. She set the stage in her bedroom with skeleton, coffin, and skull and reveled in displaying them to visitors. Bernhardt presumably never divided what she did for effect from what she felt compelled to do, so I do not try to do so here. Her obsession with death could easily have resulted from the neglect and possible abuse she suffered in her childhood. At the same time, she clearly understood that she shared her interest in death with an entire society and could profit from it. To do this she exploited the press which exploited her in turn.

Since Bernhardt connected the theatre and death from the very beginning, it is tempting to equate her acting with her burial. Her stage performances and funeral procession shared common ground in that both involved displaying her body in front of crowds to evoke tears. Her anticipation of the final event included visualizing her corpse, for even as she died she asked her son to cover her dead body with lilacs (Skinner 332). Because she could foresee her death without fear, and as a part of her career trajectory to her desired goal, she somehow retained an element of agency even at her funeral. Of all the actresses in this study, only Bernhardt planned for her final performance.

The anecdotes reported here come from newspapers, magazines, biographies, and Bernhardt's autobiography. Some of the colorful stories may have been made up by Bernhardt or press agents working on her behalf. Yet proving them false would strengthen rather than invalidate my thesis. Since I argue for Bernhardt's active agency in her image, showing that the stories that coupled her with theatrical death were all complete fabrications would not change my conclusions. On the contrary, a

demonstration that Bernhardt invented or approved the invention of all the stories would add weight to my argument.

Bernhardt's stratagems secured an audience for her performing body all the way through to her funeral procession. The public that watched the procession shares much in common with the mourners of Marilyn Monroe or Princess Diana. Mass reactions of loss measure fame but, also, the importance of what that person meant to the society. Just as with Princess Diana, the loss that brought the crowds together was the loss of a symbol that unified them as a society. Bernhardt's long and enduring fame certainly qualified her to provide the cultural cohesion Leo Braudy attributes to celebrities (15). By the time of her death, Bernhardt had become a link to a vanished past. She represented the romantic period of Dumas and Hugo; she symbolized French culture, and yes, she had become legendary.

What Bernhardt did transformed the death obsession of a nation (or of the Western world) into an art form centered on her own body. Her self-presentation as a dead actress adapted the idea of the glorified dead woman in art to create her own legend. The possibility that her evident complicity in the dead image encouraged men in false beliefs about women foregrounds a feminist perspective of Bernhardt as a woman whose self-elevation came at the expense of her gender. Bernhardt's agency enabled men to better enjoy a complete objectification of women when she reduced her own image to a passive body. Yet a feminist reading also reveals Bernhardt as a gender rebel whose use of the death tactic and "awarishness" let her break new ground for women. Bernhardt profited by and problematized the passivity in her representations.

Death may translate the idols of the present to the heights of fame, as Braudy argues (6), but it takes more than dying to enshrine a celebrity in the canon of the immortals. Tyler Cowen avers that those who die appropriately become legends, such as the press-hounded Princess Diana's being chased to death by paparazzi (21). Bernhardt intuitively understood that her transformation from a live celebrity to a dead

legend required a dramatic setting. She confided her wish to die onstage in a blaze of glory to persons as diverse as Queen Mary (Gold 323) and Gabriele d'Annunzio (Harding 200). She did her best to die acting, filming scenes in her bedroom during her final illness. Although she died in private, her well-regarded enemy the press provided an audience, reporting her final moments.

Did Bernhardt win the contest over the representation of her body, or did the press snatch it away? After Bernhardt's death, her lifetime agenda and the interests of the press basically coincided. Bernhardt the gender rebel, the cultural iconoclast, offered no more copy. Bernhardt, the legendary actress, remained for retrospectives and tributes. Although differing in their details, all the obituaries presented Bernhardt as a great actress and gave her the prominence she sought for her death. With the help of the press, her burial became a performance of public adoration and appreciation. Bernhardt could not arrange for the time and place of her death but the public presentation of it would surely have met her expectations.

None of the obituaries or the almost unmixed praise the newspapers now printed could benefit Bernhardt directly. Nor do the magazines, books, and journals that continue to praise and critique her have the power to change the life of a dead woman. Yet she lived in expectation of these events. In her self-creation as a famous dead actress she borrowed on her posthumous fame. I believe her renown more than repaid the loan. Although Bernhardt no longer actively participates in the process, her own words and stories continue to inform her representation, and her image as a legendary dead actress seems secure.

In a story so apt as to be suspect, the contest between Bernhardt and the press continued till the end. As Bernhardt lay dying, in actual truth, not in a tableau or a picture, a crowd gathered. According to several accounts, she asked her son Maurice, "Are they journalists?" "Some of them are," he responded. "Then I'll keep them



dangling,” she smiled. “They tortured me all my life; now it’s my turn to torture them.”  
(Gold 330, Skinner 332).

Those were her last words.

## Chapter Four: Eleonora Duse's Italian Soul

Eleonora Duse (1858–1924), international star, national treasure, and patriotic Italian died in Pittsburgh in April, 1924. Those involved in the memorializing process contended for control of her body, attempting to interpolate her renown in competing narratives of national pride and the universality of art. Duse died at a turning point for Italy, the year Mussolini's Fascists became the majority party. Mussolini and the Fascists orchestrated the ceremonies following her death to create a pageant of Italian pride. At the same time, the theatre community tried to establish an artistic narrative more akin to Duse's ideals. In the memorial discourse, nationalist motifs dominated, and the actress body stood in for the nation.

This chapter will examine the two very different concepts of patriotism that converged on Duse's body—Duse's own and that of the Italian nationalists. As I will show, Duse equated her ideal theatre with patriotism, while nationalists thought of theatre as one place among many for the performance of patriotism. Duse, more concerned with inner truth than outer display, wanted to elevate the Italian theatre to a higher spiritual plane. Contemporary accounts depict Duse as an ardent performer focused on this goal. Duse tried to share her dream of a national theatre with the playwright/politician d'Annunzio and Mussolini, both of whom thought such a theatre a means rather than an end. While Duse believed in the expansion of the Italian spirit, d'Annunzio and Mussolini believed in the expansion of Italian territory. Not surprisingly, given such contrasting views, the national theatre never materialized. Instead, Duse's burial moment became a strategically important performance for the nationalists. The geographically vast memorialization they arranged for Duse obscured her spiritual patriotism in the service of the nationalist agenda.

Despite ample acknowledgment of Duse's importance as an actress, no one has addressed the major political significance of her multiple funeral ceremonies until now. As in my previous chapters, the burial moment emerges as an event when social

discourses emerge and competing interests contest the narrative of the actress. In this instance, the nation claimed the actress body; Duse's reputation helped center the imagined community of Italian nationalism. This overdue examination also evaluates the significance of d'Annunzio's and Mussolini's differing strategies for appropriating the actress body and how people in the theatre tried to resist this appropriation. At the same time this study glances at Duse's significance on the world stage and how her theatrical fame contended with and/or played into the nationalist agenda, which turned her memorial services into patriotic rallies for Fascism.

After a lifetime of avoiding publicity, Duse at her death became national property and international news. Dying in a hotel room on a theatrical tour, Duse ended life as she began it. Born in a hotel room while her parents were touring, Duse led the life of an itinerant player. She made her stage debut at the age of four (Le Gallienne 25). In time she became famous enough to assemble her own touring company. But Duse never enjoyed publicity and throughout her life tried to disappear from public view when not on stage. She showed little interest in adulation, usually lived reclusively, and rarely granted interviews. She once explained in a letter to a reporter that she was the slave of her temperament, which forced her to experience what her characters suffered. Therefore, when offstage Duse wanted only to forget all about her work and cared nothing for publicity (Gilder 375).

Actor Lou Tellegen, who worked with both Bernhardt and Duse, contrasted Bernhardt's friendliness with Duse's aloofness. He also noted disapprovingly that Duse avoided and disliked public tributes to her talent. Tellegen felt this behavior to be unactresslike, affected, and detrimental to the profession (Le Gallienne 93). The idea that the profession of "actress" determined offstage behavior might well apply to Bernhardt but not to Duse, with her belief that an actress should disappear into her roles. Through these differences and the extensive publicity both received, Bernhardt

and Duse resisted cultural attempts to regard actresses as a monolithic group with fixed attributes.

Despite Tellegen's criticism, Duse worked to ennoble the profession, and her reticence developed into an effective public relations gimmick, as audiences flocked to see the mysterious disciple of art. Instead of manipulating and refining her public image as Bernhardt did, Duse concealed herself from the public, which ironically became an image some perceived as a marketing strategy. Still, all reports indicate that Duse truly disliked public notice. Although obviously complicit with her agents in the construction of her persona, Duse retreated from the public eye and left it to others to exploit the media potential of her concealment.

This reclusive tendency also figured in Duse's private life. Social as well as professional occasions could cause Duse to disappear from view, and an unhappy emotional state would often make Duse avoid her friends. Once, in an expansive mood, she invited everyone she knew to a party. On the day of the event, she suffered a bout of depression and hid from her guests (Le Gallienne 103). Although never before so characterized, these extreme mood swings may have indicated a bipolar disorder. In addition to this possible mental illness, Duse suffered from tuberculosis. She frequently cancelled performances due to illness, physical and emotional. Her most prized privilege, one that she never surrendered while she lived, was the prerogative of withholding her body from public display.

In Duse's communications with friends and family she stressed how acting exhausted her, even to the point of collapse. After performances she often sobbed uncontrollably. Such incidents added to her mystique as a woman who gave everything to her art, reserving nothing for herself. Although she undoubtedly controlled her postperformance behavior at some level, her exhaustion and illness were real. Her histrionics also took their toll on her body. She aged prematurely and, unlike the Divine Sarah, took no pains to conceal the ravages of illness while onstage.

Duse avoided any display of herself as herself in any medium, and even signed her photographs with the names of her characters. Further distancing herself from Bernhardt, Duse told her friend, the French playwright Edouard Schneider, that she would not write a memoir because she might make mistakes, could not create literature, and believed that writing an autobiography would display vanity. She also said that no actress should ever write her memoirs because doing so opened the book of her private life to the public (Bordeux 185).

In all of these instances, Duse drew a sharp distinction between private and public occasions. While Duse exposed her suffering body and overwrought nerves in performance, she avoided interviewers and responded only briefly or not at all to negative portrayals of her in the work of others (like those of Bernhardt and d'Annunzio). Such a private figure presents difficulties for the researcher, who must rely on the reportage of her friends and colleagues, since, unlike Bernhardt, she seemed unconcerned with crafting an enduring image.

Theatre provided Duse's sole public outlet. Acting made her feel alive (Lugné-Poë 216), and she believed it a vitally important form of artistic expression. Yet the theatre frequently disappointed her, and she often distanced herself from it. She barely respected the theatre in its current state (she would not let her daughter Enrichetta see her act until Enrichetta became an adult). She envisioned theatre as her calling, and her pronouncements on theatre to friends concerned its spiritual more than its financial or even artistic possibilities. Le Gallienne characterizes Duse's efforts as a struggle to make the theatre greater and purer; she cites Duse's desire to reunite theatre and religion (184). At one point Duse discussed reviving the theatre of ancient Greece with Isadora Duncan (96). She told Edouard Schneider she would perform in a cave if necessary, like the early Christians (14). Duse felt theatre could act as a wing to bear us up to God, but only if the plays offered the truth of the human heart. According to Le

Gallienne, Duse's inability to make the theatre match her hopes caused her to interrupt her acting career.

For Duse, both theatre and country consisted of spirit. The love of country and the love of art were passions of the soul, not worldly ambitions. She told Schneider that just as only the French could feel Racine, so only the Italians could appreciate certain Italian plays. She remarked, "C'est de point de vue que je comprends la idée de patrie" (49). Patriotism for Duse was the emotion stirred in a people by the theatrical masterpieces of their native land. When she related to Schneider, "Je suis Italienne d'âme" (127), she was rejecting the patriotism of outer display. Instead of emphasizing the territorial claims and political unity (as a nationalist word), Duse described herself as a patriot of the soul. Duse regarded Italian theatre as the spiritual force that bound her people together. Her idea of a homeland, based in the country's dramatic literature, caused her to see theatre as central to Italy's existence.

This patriotic regard explains her loyalty to Italian-language theatre throughout her career, a loyalty sometimes puzzling to her biographers. Duse learned French, but, even when acting at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre with French actors, she continued to speak Italian. Her attempts to spiritualize the theatre and improve Italy provides the basis for my reinterpretation of her activities. Only in the context of her quest for a better theatre can her ceaseless attempt to discover and promote Italian playwrights and her much misinterpreted relationship with Gabriele d'Annunzio be understood.

The Italian repertoire's failure to match Duse's aspirations prompted her to seek national/theatre reform. She felt that current Italian plays copied the French theatre poorly, and that there was little from the Italian theatrical past still worth performing. In her first season as an actress-manager she gambled successfully on a new Italian play (*Tristi Amori*) that failed in its premiere (Weaver 60). Duse urged Italian writers like her friend and lover, opera librettist Arrigo Boito, to create for the stage. In the future she would both encourage and perform new Italian plays in the hopes of creating a vibrant

national theatre. She could hold to her judgments despite adverse critical or public reaction. But not until she met the Italian poet and writer Gabriele d'Annunzio did she think of creating a national theatre, an enterprise that could have seemed anathema to Bernhardt.

Together Duse and d'Annunzio planned a festival theatre in Albano for the performance of the best plays of the region; the theatre would open, of course, with a d'Annunzio play. Duse felt elated upon convincing d'Annunzio to write for the theatre and thought that together they would create a pure national theatre, an achievement that would crown her life's work (Bassnett 123). While her former lover, opera librettist Arrigo Boito, thought the theatre an unworthy occupation, d'Annunzio shared Duse's belief in theatre's power. His enthusiasm excited and inspired Duse. She failed to realize that, while she cared about the fate of theatre itself, d'Annunzio thought of theatre as a vehicle for personal recognition and the promulgation of his political ideas.

Duse's relationship with d'Annunzio appears not as that of a masochistic woman devoted to an abusive partner; rather, she was willing to suffer anything provided the pain brought her closer to her goal of creating a national theatre. Duse's faith in the d'Annunzio repertoire seems explicable only in light of her belief in his genius. Many Italians indeed believed him the genius of his generation. Although an autocratic artist in her own right, she accepted a traditionally female role as d'Annunzio's helper, not an equal partner. But she did so because she believed her art (not her gender) inferior to his. She thought acting ephemeral and literature enduring. She hoped d'Annunzio's plays would revive the Italian theatre, the focus of her life's work (Le Gallienne 47). Duse supported d'Annunzio's adherence to Italian settings and Italian themes; she financed the costly production demands his insistence on historical accuracy required, believing such investment would ennoble the Italian stage. She wanted theatre to dispense with the trivial and ascend to a grander scale of human suffering and redemption.

While Duse collaborated theatrically with d'Annunzio and endorsed his every endeavor during their relationship (Becker 23, Harding 152), she never concerned herself directly with his political campaigns. She devoted herself instead to producing and performing his plays. She accepted his amateur directing and her diminishment as an actress to bring his visions to the stage (Bassnett 122) .

D'Annunzio's plays often did poorly, but Duse performed plays she thought would elevate the theatre to a religion, not necessarily plays that people enjoyed. In an article she wrote on the occasion of Ristori's birthday, she pronounced the Italian authors of that great Italian actress's repertory dead and forgotten. Young Italy, she declared, longed for the renaissance provided in d'Annunzio's poetic dramas, and as an artist and an Italian she placed herself at the service of this ideal (Weaver 238).

Duse's dream of a national theatre and a national repertory coexisted with a seemingly contradictory preoccupation with international dramatic literature. She chose these pieces from both practical and artistic motives. Sometimes she acted in foreign plays because the receipts for certain audience favorites paid the bills more reliably. Despite her efforts to bring new Italian plays to Europe and the United States, international audiences remembered her as Dumas' Marguerite, Sudermann's Magda, and Ibsen's Ellida, not the heroines of d'Annunzian plays (Anna and Silvia). Queen Victoria favored Duse's *Mirandolina*, but, though part of the Italian heritage, Goldoni lacked the depth of characterization Duse sought in her art. Duse did play some roles for their popularity, though she tried to transform them into more meaningful representations through her intense portrayals. Duse picked other roles (like those in Ibsen) because truth in character mattered to her even more than national origin. This woman, who loved Italy as a part of herself (Rheinhardt 293), felt truth served both art and country, since the two connected at the soul.

Duse sought out the roles that spoke to her. As a young actress (but a theatre veteran) she drew inspiration from a Bernhardt tour; she originally performed much of



the same repertoire before taking risks on less traditional plays. She brought Ibsen's work to Italy for the first time with *A Doll's House* (Weaver 86) and acquired the rights to foreign plays while touring. While Duse might have preferred to advocate native-language drama, she put spirit first—those characters and situations that addressed the issues of the soul. She wanted to uplift and spiritually educate (Italian) audiences, to nurture their inner beings so that they could appreciate the great Italian works that might unite them as a people. Duse's nationalism even increased her global presence, as she tried to fund the Albano theatre with international tours. The national theatre never materialized. Instead she created an international reputation as an actress of truth. Her international fame endured and, when she died, her global reputation as an artist and an Italian affected worldwide reaction to her death.

Whether because of poor health, disillusionment, or a combination of factors, at age fifty-one Duse stopped performing for over a decade. Yet because her dreams for Italy centered on the Italian theatre, she continued to seek its improvement. She bought a villa in Rome and attempted to convert it into a haven for young actresses. Reflecting on her own past, she thought that young thespians would want a peaceful haven well-stocked with useful literature. After spending more than she could afford, she found that actresses preferred the freedom of their own meager lodgings and had little interest in libraries. Her *Casa delle Attrice* (House of Actresses) failed almost before it began and nearly bankrupted her (Harding 171).

World War I brought this experiment to a definitive end and a temporary hiatus in Duse's efforts to spiritualize the Italian theatre. During that turbulent time, Duse involved herself with the soldiers' theatre, until she decided it in no way addressed the true horror of the situation. So she strove to directly aid Italian soldiers instead, by listening to their troubles and delivering messages to their families (Rheinhardt 260–1). After the war, Duse retreated to Asolo, a town near her beloved Venice.

In financial difficulties, she returned to acting, but the element of spiritual quest should not be overlooked. Duse supposedly turned down a government pension because, while she could work, she would not accept what she did not earn. Duse's connection of theatre and spirit made complete retirement unlikely for her because she never ceased her contemplation of soul. In 1921 Duse chose Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea* for her return. Duse thought Ibsen's women amazingly complex and that his plays evidenced an unrivalled understanding of the heart and mind (Le Gallienne 115). Despite a warm reception for the play, her financial troubles continued. When producer Morris Gest suggested an American tour, she agreed.

On her return to the theatre she continued to press for an improved Italian drama. She asked Gallarati-Scotti, another non-dramatist Italian writer, to write a play for her. When he completed *Cosa Sia (Thy Will Be Done)*, she performed the piece. Like d'Annunzio's work, it was coolly received. Her persistence with this work as with d'Annunzio's plays testifies to the importance she placed on transforming the repertoire and the Italian theatre itself. It also disproves the notion that Duse performed d'Annunzio's work for purely personal reasons. Duse simply valued what she considered spiritual plays, despite critical disfavor.

During the American tour Duse's age and struggle with illness created an onstage display as notable and noted as her acting style. Concerned that Duse might become ill again, her producer Morris Gest insured the tour with Lloyd's of London. Gest planned a carefully limited schedule in the hope that it would preserve Duse's health. She would perform only a few times a week, and the original tour included just twenty performances in all. Rather than concealing her frailty, her performances emphasized it in a way that deeply impressed onlookers; the power of her performances seemingly derived as much from her evident condition as her acting skill. Duse's visible efforts to persevere matched the intensity in her texts.

In choosing her repertoire for this final tour Duse picked two Ibsen pieces and three Italian plays, including *Cosa Sia* and d'Annunzio's *The Dead City* (Sayler). Along with her abiding belief in d'Annunzio (as playwright at least), the Italian choices indicate the type of character she wanted to play. In all five plays she enacted a similar role, a suffering, self-sacrificing woman pushed to the very brink of endurance. According to le Gallienne, Duse believed her great achievement to be the annihilation of her own ego (22). The women in these plays perform such a feat, sacrificing ego in search of a greater good. In these plays, the subordination of woman exalts the power of the female will. Ibsen's *Ghosts* and *The Lady from the Sea* made their points with more subtlety than the three Italian melodramas, but essentially she played the same woman in each. All three share the themes of adultery and mental anguish.

"Before I leave this world for good, " Duse supposedly told a friend before her departure, "I should like to raise myself, through my work—and for my work . . . to the very heart of the Mystery" (Le Gallienne 183–184). The feverish emotions in these plays demanded a passion and spiritual intensity familiar to Duse and in keeping with this last ambition. Unlike the aging Bernhardt, who chose her plays and selections to capitalize on her remaining abilities, Duse chose to display her disabilities. Instead of concealing her nerves, she chose characters under similar strain and lived their torments. Duse preferred enacting psychological breakdowns to death, and it is significant that her character dies in only one of her chosen plays (*Cosa Sia*).

Although weighted towards the Italian, the tour included the Ibsen pieces and thus represented international repertoire. At this point in her career, the American audience would watch Duse in virtually any play. The tour's predominance of Italian works evidenced her preference for works written in her own language and her determination to promote Italian drama. The selection of the Ibsen plays sent a more complex message. She wanted spiritual truth to permeate the Italian theatre, but at the

same time she acknowledged revelations of the human soul as being not confined to any one country.

In Baltimore Duse decided to extend her tour under new management. The obituary in *Variety* blames Duse's fatal illness on this decision, crediting her friends with the foreknowledge that such a tour would be too much for her strength. She herself insisted that return tickets to Italy for the entire company should be guaranteed from the beginning of this new tour and made no attempt to hide her misgivings about her health from her friends.

Duse's health began to fail in the wind and snow of Detroit. And, on April first, the theatre company reached Pittsburgh, which Duse called the most hideous city in the world. The local paper quoted her as saying it was an ideal vacation spot.

On April fifth, she walked from the hotel to the theatre in a driving rain and found the door closed. Soaked and chilled to the bone, she was finally ushered into an overheated dressing room. She insisted on acting that night in, ironically, *La Porta Chiusa* (the closed door). She triumphed, taking many curtain calls, but went to bed afterward with a high fever.

As her friends kept the severity of her illness secret in deference to her wishes, Duse's reputation for erratic behavior granted her an odd kind of privacy in her final days. No one outside her immediate circle believed that she was dying. The woman who tried and failed to keep her life hidden kept her last days private with minimal effort. So well did her image of eccentric reclusiveness obscure her ailing body that the Cleveland theatre, convinced of a trick, sent their own physician to verify that she was actually ill. The *Gazette Times* raved about her performance, but when the tour's next stop in Cleveland was cancelled, the Pittsburgh *Sun* wrote: "Ze performance? Ze pepul? Pouf! Pouf-pouf! Ze temperament? Ah zat ees ze only ting" (Weaver 359). The Tacoma Ledger mentioned her cancellation as one of her whims: "In Pittsburgh as she was starting for Cleveland, she saw a few April snowflakes and shouted 'Ah! Ze

blizzard!' and refused to move" (Letters and Art 24). The *Variety* obituary mentions how during this tour, unsympathetic localities thought reports of Duse's weakness were publicity ploys, and this continued till the end, the actual weakness concealed by reports of simulations.

Even Morris Gest, the producer who brought her to the United States, thought she would recover enough to return to Italy. He arranged for a special benefit performance of Max Reinhardt's production of *The Miracle* on April eighteenth. The profits were to be given to Duse as a special farewell gift. Perhaps some of the tributes later printed in the American papers resulted from a feeling of guilt at this disbelief. Her exclusivity, her insistence on bodily privacy added to her fame.

Aside from seclusion, Duse wanted to be back in Italy. Her secretary Desirée von Wetheimstein and her maid Maria Avogardo watched over her during her illness and stayed at her bedside day and night. During her last days she thanked them for their kindness and expressed concern for them. For herself, she said she was ready to die, if only she could go home to Italy and not end her days in cold and cheerless Pittsburgh (Pontiero 363).

On Easter Sunday she saw some of her acting company and told them they would all leave together the next day. She concerned herself with her troupe, trying to ensure their safe passage back to Italy. As she became more disoriented and frantic about leaving, her maid and secretary pretended to pack her trunks, as they had done before in response to her previous requests. She woke shortly after midnight Monday morning to insist again that they must leave. She died at two a.m., on the 21st of April, 1924.

When Duse died in a foreign city, she made an unintentionally poignant exit. Her life had been spent in the service of Italian theatre, and her death so far away from her beloved country created a disequilibrium that attracted international attention, a crisis of sentiment ripe for exploitation. Duse's championship of contemporary Italian plays

identified her with Italian culture in general. Many Italians who never saw her perform knew of her reputation as an actress of international stature, rivaling that of Sarah Bernhardt, and felt pride in her success. Her efforts to aid her fellow Italians during the war also became public knowledge. The *New York Times* obituary describes Duse as “a national glory.”

What made Duse’s instant politicization so ironic was her own consistent rejection of symbolic status. Throughout her career, she gave charity directly from her limited means instead of participating in benefit performances. She once kept a king waiting outside her stage door and refused to let him enter. With humility much akin to pride, she felt herself above the necessity to promote or show herself as a star or national symbol.

What agency, if any, did Duse retain in death? To what extent did her body feature in the narrative of others, and to what extent did it accord with her beliefs and wishes? This study contends that the intentions of the actress do not die with her. Instead, the core values of the actress and the sum of her performative life remain in the burial moment to ratify or dispute the disposition of the actress body. Social institutions may decide the fate of the physical remains and may ignore testamentary or spoken dying wishes. Yet cultural reaction to the event will include public knowledge of the actress. While even intimate friends cannot accurately substitute for her, their memories may represent and stand in place of her viewpoint. These memories, along with any extant writings, perpetuate the actress’s beliefs and thus argue for her agency in the burial.

Throughout Duse's career, she esteemed the spiritual aspect of her art over the physical. Her body was, in fact, secondary, so inconsequential that she abandoned wigs and makeup for her final roles. Then, with her death, politicians made her body the star in a performance of nationalism. Despite her profession, Duse thought of death as unsuited to public display. She said that when her time came to die, her soul would

remember and regret her death-bed scenes (Weaver 220). Her reluctance to make this final passage a public spectacle thus seems ironic in the context of the succession of funerals that displayed her death to an international public.

The only available written evidence indicates that Duse expected her burial to provide a tranquil withdrawal from the world. She wrote the playwright Marco Praga in the autumn of 1920, describing her affection for the town of Asolo, due to its beauty, tranquility, and its proximity to places and people that she loved. She expressed her desire to be buried in the town that became her retreat from acting, crowds, and publicity (Rheinhardt 260). She urged Praga to remember and tell everyone that “Questo sarà l’asilo della mia ultima vecchiaia, e qui desidero di essere seppellita” [roughly translated: this will be the haven of my old age and it is here that I wish to be buried] ([www.comune.asolo.tv.it](http://www.comune.asolo.tv.it)). Duse planned to be buried far from the theatre, which was consistent with her belief that inspiration came not from her but through her (body). This choice of a quiet haven for her last resting place supports my contention that she thought of her death as an eminently private matter.

Why then did Duse’s death become the catalyst for such intense public activity? What prompted the pomp that surrounded repatriation of her body? The time and place of her death accounts for much of the reaction. At this time, Italy was at a political crossroads. In 1922 the threat of a general strike gave Mussolini the chance to muster his political followers, the Fascists (short for *Fasci di Combattimento* or group of fighters). Victor Emmanuel III made Mussolini prime minister. The Fascist party won (in a questionable election) a parliamentary majority on 1924. In 1926 the Fascists abolished all other political parties, and Mussolini became dictator. The Fascists passed 81 theatre regulations between 1922 and 1939, attempting to create a national theatre that would harness the Italian imagination (Berezin 644). The Fascists undoubtedly wanted to foster support for their policies, including the colonial expansion undertaken in the 1930’s. Duse’s death in Pittsburgh made her burial ceremonies more significant.

The timing of Duse's death, just as the Fascists secured power in the Italian parliament, turned the international spotlight on the funeral of arguably the world's most famous Italian.

For all the national and international interest, the story initially began with a personal plea. Duse's former lover d'Annunzio did not rush to Duse's side during her final illness (as Lecouvreur's lover Maurice de Saxe supposedly did). Instead he telegraphed Mussolini after her death, asking that the "most Italian of hearts" not be buried abroad. His letter appeared as an impassioned personal request. But since he handed out carbons of his telegram to the Roman press (Harding 253)—it appeared in print in Italy and papers worldwide—he obviously hoped for publicity.

D'Annunzio rarely did anything without expecting public recognition. He published his first poems at the age of sixteen and continued writing poetry and novels until his liaison with Duse inspired him to write plays as well. The two stayed romantically and professionally involved from 1897 to 1904. Basic to their plans was the belief that d'Annunzio's works would last while Duse's fame would fade, and accordingly both put d'Annunzio's needs first.

This reversed the pattern of earlier centuries (n.b. Elizabeth Howe on the Restoration) where an older playwright, inspired by a younger actress, such as Cibber and Oldfield (or Otway and Barry), would create roles the actress could play to increase her success. Although d'Annunzio frequently claimed Duse (slightly older than he) as his muse, her appearances in his plays enhanced his reputation, not hers.

Most of d'Annunzio's plays never achieved great success, even when Duse starred in them. D'Annunzio wrote his first play *The City of the Dead* with Duse's encouragement and for her tour. He sent the play to Bernhardt instead, who made the mistake of performing in it. Duse fared slightly better when she received d'Annunzio's permission to do the role in 1901.



Within Italy she helped d'Annunzio establish a reputation as Italy's leading poet (and lover), a reputation that aided him in his political career. In the face of adverse criticism, she stubbornly performed plays like *La Gioconda* until they gained an Italian following. She performed in and paid for the productions of all the plays d'Annunzio offered her. At this time, d'Annunzio wished to win a mass audience to further his political ambitions. Aided by Duse, d'Annunzio put his ideas for Italy into plays like *La Gloria (Glory, 1899)*, which portrays a clash between two rival leaders of the masses. Later dramas glorified Italian expansion (Becker 23).

D'Annunzio's view of theatre shows his nationalist/Fascist bent. D'Annunzio envisioned actors as vehicles for his ideas and sought to mold them completely, preferring new graduates to experienced players. No matter how much in love with him she was, or how strong her belief was in d'Annunzio, Duse could not become an untried actress again for him, and d'Annunzio could not control her. D'Annunzio's belief that the actor should serve the author and the author should speak for the nation (Bassnett) conflicted with Duse's idea that the actress should serve the truth.

Unable to mold Duse as an actress, d'Annunzio created a fictional version of her. Just as he would claim her dead body for Italy, even so he publicly announced his possession of her living body. His novel *Il Fuoco* gave "La Foscarina" the details of Duse's past life as confided to him by the actress herself. He also described the ravages wrought by illness and age on her body in merciless detail.

D'Annunzio, who regularly used incidents from his life in his writings, either failed to realize or to respect Duse's veil of privacy. Instead he staked a claim of literary ownership of her body as both lover and writer that presaged his later claim to her body when he adored Duse's remains in public print. In both cases, d'Annunzio displayed Duse's body to attract an audience for his writing. His possession of the well-regarded actress body associated him with her reputation. He tried to bolster this association abroad by insisting that her theatrical tour of the United States in 1902 include a lecture

tour by him. The theatrical manager refused, citing d'Annunzio's betrayal of Duse in his novel as the reason no one would want to attend his lectures. Duse dropped the lecture tour but insisted on a d'Annunzian repertoire. The tour did poorly.

Although d'Annunzio's exploitive book and assorted infidelities strained the relationship, the two continued to collaborate until 1904, when Duse planned to create the starring role in d'Annunzio's *La Figlia di Iorio*, a drama of Italian peasant life. Duse became ill, and d'Annunzio (currently with a new lover) refused to postpone the premiere, which proceeded with the actress Irma Gramatica in Duse's role. The play became d'Annunzio's biggest success. In poetic prose typical of all her extant letters, Duse wrote d'Annunzio, declaring that after having given her all for his destiny she was dying of grief (Weaver 254–5).

This analysis (setting aside the personal implications of d'Annunzio's faithlessness) reveals how their views of Italy made their professional parting of the ways inevitable. For Duse, her work in the theatre contributed to the spirit of Italy, and considerations of self always gave way to art. D'Annunzio put self first and defined patriotism differently, establishing his patriotism along traditional masculine lines of conquest and annexation. D'Annunzio promoted expansion and risked death in territorial battles. His patriotism made him a war hero. At the beginning of World War I, d'Annunzio urged Italy's entry into the war and fought recklessly enough to lose an eye. In 1919 he joined the Nationalists and wrote for *Idea Nazionale* (De Grand 107). That same year, objecting to the ceding of the port city Fiume in the Treaty of Versailles, he gathered a force, occupied Fiume, and ruled it "for Italy" as commandant until forced out by the Italian army in 1920. After this apex of his political life, d'Annunzio began to lose his grasp on power and the public. He tried to keep the memory of his achievements alive in any way possible. On Duse's return to the stage in 1921 he sent a delegation of Fiume women with roses, turning the applause for Duse's performance

into a patriotic demonstration with cheers for himself as well as for Duse and Italy (NYT 4/22/1924).

By the time of Duse's death d'Annunzio had already begun an involuntary fade from public life. Her death offered the possibility of a publicity boost just when he needed one. By drawing international attention to Duse's body, he could assert his own claims to represent Italy internationally through the works she originally inspired, financed, and performed. D'Annunzio knew exactly how to rouse national passions rhetorically and instantly began the transformation of an Italian actress into an Italian relic. With his telegram to Mussolini, reporting that "the most Italian of hearts has ceased to beat," d'Annunzio emphasized the corporeal heart, while Duse herself ascribed Italianness to the intangible soul. D'Annunzio's reduction of Duse to the physical denied her a spiritual involvement in her own commemoration. The actress body with the stilled heart became a possession that must be returned to d'Annunzio and Italy. In the weeks to follow Duse's silent Italian heart would be presented as the heart of Italy to a sympathetic world press. The *Washington Post* followed d'Annunzio's lead and described Duse's death in Pittsburgh as immeasurably tragic: "far from the land she so intensely loved and from a people whose affection for her was but little on this side of idolatry" (qtd in "The Incomparable Duse").

D'Annunzio covered over his neglect and rejections of the living actress in his tributes to the "adored body." The silenced actress could not question the genuineness of his grief or object to the remedy he proposed. His pain, he wrote, could only be eased by the transport of the corpse back to Italy at the Government's expense. The return to Italy followed Duse's wishes, but the public forum of the proposal and d'Annunzio's proprietary interest in the matter might have troubled her Italian yet very private soul.

D'Annunzio began the proceedings, but if he hoped to appear as chief mourner, he had not counted on Mussolini. D'Annunzio's telegram to Mussolini gave the politician

the chance to publish his own version of his patronage of Duse. Mussolini wrote that he had already arranged for Duse's transport. He added that he had offered Duse a pension so that she would not have to leave Italy. All the Italian papers printed his response, and the *London Times* reported this as a revelation along with the news that Mussolini had accepted the presidency of a committee to organize a ceremony in Duse's honor (Duse's Body to Be Taken to Italy 4/24:15e). Mussolini immediately ordered the Italian ambassador Prince Gelasio Caetani to Pittsburgh to handle the funeral arrangements.

Unlike d'Annunzio's, Mussolini's star (in April, 1924) was in the ascendant. The premier of Italy with a parliamentary majority elected earlier that month, he believed that Italian theatre could help spread the Fascist message. The 1923 document that merged the Italian Nationalists and Fascists appoints him president of an Institute of National culture to diffuse the party's doctrines (Cunsolo 239). In a 1933 speech he stated that theatre should be aimed at the people and extolled its ability to create grand collective passions (qtd in Berezin 639).

Mussolini had visited d'Annunzio in Fiume, deliberately flattering the less practical politician. Mussolini thus ensured that d'Annunzio, then at the height of his popularity, would not urge his followers to oppose Mussolini's plans. D'Annunzio, as the most eloquent voice in the Nationalist party and the hero of Fiume, could have derailed Mussolini at that time (Lyttelton 189). Instead, in 1923 the Nationalists merged by a pact of union with Mussolini's Fascist party.

Seeking another useful ally, Mussolini approached Duse before she left Italy to discuss the theatre. Although indifferent to his politics, Duse told her friend Olga that he won her over by asking what could be done for the Italian theatre; he suggested that she draft a proposal for a national theatre. (Weaver 346). Duse still dreamed of such a theatre, but not of planning and creating it. She hoped that after her tour it would somehow materialize.

Having tried and failed to create a theatre for national propaganda with Duse (it seems unlikely they would have agreed on repertoire in any case), Mussolini enlisted Duse's body in his cause. He prolonged Duse's final appearance to a remarkable extent, giving her no fewer than four funeral services with an Italian government presence at all four ceremonies and ample government flowers and tributes in between. Mussolini adroitly manipulated the memorials to maximize press coverage and favorable mentions of his tributes. In this way the Duse burial brought him international attention that helped consolidate his hold on power. Mussolini became dictator in 1926.

Mussolini took full advantage of his position as premier and went far beyond the transport home he promised to give the actress's remains. He not only arranged for the many public appearances of Duse's body; he ensured prominent representation by the Italian government at every step along the way, starting with the Italian ambassador, who involved everyone from the King of Italy on down through Mussolini's cabinet in the proceedings. Mussolini appears to have outdone d'Annunzio in obtaining international recognition for his efforts.

If her biographer and friend Edouard Schneider can be believed, Duse knew and objected to Mussolini's and d'Annunzio's earlier exploitations of her fame for publicity purposes. She mentions asking Mussolini for help and how he alerted the newspapers when he came to visit her. She told Schneider that he offered her anything but did nothing for her when she asked for payment for her acting troupe. Duse dismissed d'Annunzio's efforts on her behalf even more conclusively. As a writer she still honored him but respected nothing else about him. She said the commander of Fiume, (as she scornfully called him) gets ideas, but, once he writes down his inspirations, does nothing more. Duse remarked that when she was ill he wrote a beautiful letter to the papers about her and a concerned note to one of her friends and that was all (127–128). D'Annunzio excelled at getting his name before the public. But he failed to follow up on the promise that Duse saw in him at first.

In Duse's burial Mussolini and d'Annunzio continued to seek publicity, to the neglect of Duse's wishes. Mussolini played up the press and ignored the welfare of the living actors; d'Annunzio wrote his telegram and rested on his laurels. Both had reasons to want to demonstrate their connections to Italian achievement when Duse's body, with its aura of success, so conveniently became available for international display. Both tried to symbolically appropriate the body. D'Annunzio grabbed Duse's heart in print. Mussolini, more practical and powerful than d'Annunzio, simply took the body. He snatched the corpse from Duse's theatre family and raised it up where millions could watch.

Immediately after her death, Duse's friends and associates from her theatre company retained possession of the actress's body. The theatre people resisted the political appropriation and persistently tried to commemorate Duse in ways they thought she would have appreciated. In the weeks that followed, the guardianship of her body alternated between the actors and the government. The honors given her also alternated between those from actors and theatrical groups, and those given by politicians and political organizations. Both groups sought to assert their superior claim to Duse. Duse the actress belonged to all theatre artists, while Duse the Italian served the needs of the politicians.

The friends with her at the end apparently tried to shield her body from the crowds and publicity she shunned. Mussolini doomed any such attempt by her troupe to keep Duse's interment simple. Reportedly, Prince Caetani and Duse's actors clashed at the Pittsburgh funeral home. Since Duse died still hoping she would return to Italy, she did not leave instructions for her funeral. At least, she left nothing in writing. Henry Knepler's biography asserts that Duse told Katherine Onslow and others that she wanted a quiet funeral. This opposition to Mussolini's ideas caused a conflict at Samson's Funeral Parlor, where reporters overheard angry words at the first funeral service, an event attended solely by actors and representatives of the Italian

government (“Italy Puts Wreath”). Acting on Mussolini’s instructions, Caetani planned to send the body to New York and Rome for ceremonies there. The actors paid their own tribute by guarding the body every evening (NYT 4/24). A dispute may account for the week that elapsed before the ambassador could arrange to move the body (Knepler 1968, 281).

The actors Duse brought to the United States, now left stranded, clung to her body. Perhaps it offered a sense of security and an insurance policy against abandonment. Although Mussolini repeated a promise made to Duse and assured the actors of a safe passage home, their dispute with his representative may have shaken their assurance. They continued to mount their vigil over Duse’s body, traveling in the same railway car as the flower-covered coffin. Self-interest may have chimed with devotion in their determination to accompany Duse’s corpse all the way home to Italy.

The instant the body arrived in New York on April 28, the public descended in attempts to pay homage. Neither the theatre people nor the politicians welcomed this early intrusion by outsiders. At the station, the stationmaster kept away the crowd citing a request from the Italian consulate. Duse’s friend Catherine Onslow objected to the taxicabs that followed the hearse, and the Italian consul general, following orders from the Italian government, kept the public out of the church of St. Vincent Ferrer (“Duse’s Body Here”). Here Duse’s friends and the government agreed—one group wishing to curb display, and the other to postpone it. Prince Caetani wanted the public barred until the funeral the next day. A *New York Times* heading mentions Duse’s wishes in connection with the exclusion, but the story does not elaborate that point.

The *New York Times* reported that, at the church, exhausted by the trip and their long vigil, the actors yielded their watch over the body to representatives of Italian societies and the Italian government. This changing of the honor guard moved Duse completely from the theatrical to the political sphere. According to Le Gallienne, the company members did not depart but took turns watching over the body. And Le

Gallienne herself came every night after her performances. In the public record, however, the theatre people left, and the civic representatives took charge of the actress body.

In what might have been a deliberate move to enhance the spectacle of homage, not enough tickets were issued to fill the church for the funeral. Deliberately or not, the underticketing swelled the crowd outside to fifteen thousand people, while pews in the back of the church remained empty. Inside the church, the politicians involved themselves in every detail of presentation to display the evidence of national pride in the deceased. The Italian ambassador and the Italian consul supervised the arrangement of the flowers and placed wreaths from King Victor Emmanuel and Mussolini on the coffin. Mussolini's flowers bore the inscription "To Italy's First Daughter," and the Italian opera tenor Giovanni Martinelli sang to the assembled Italian officials, Italian nobility, and members of national and local Italian organizations. The theatrical community attended in great numbers, but the politicians did the staging, a display of a united Italy grieving over the international star who was now a national heroine.

Careful planning and international cooperation evidenced itself, as the procession taking Duse's body to the steamship passed Central Park. The procession paused. A group of Italian-American Fascisti carrying black streamers outstretched their arms and bowed their heads, giving the Fascist salute to the dead. Then an army private played taps, and the procession resumed. This carefully planned moment enrolled Duse in the ranks of the Fascists, yet the armed forces of the United States honored her. The warring salute and taps represented rival claims of national politics and international honor; yet in the space created by the actress body they coexisted peaceably. The Fascists welcomed the military salute that made their symbol more valuable, and the United States simply chose not to directly acknowledge the symbolic association of Duse with the Fascists.



Next came the moment when Duse returned to Italian territory. Here, the government arranged for the body to consecrate its own ceremonial space. The funeral procession proceeded to Pier 97, where the Italian liner *Giulio* had converted a compartment on the second deck into a shrine. Dockworkers raised the casket with the body in it by ropes to load it on board the steamship. The Italian ambassador stopped the motion picture cameramen documenting the funeral and procession from filming this undignified procedure on the grounds that it would be disrespectful. The cameras could film freely, so long as they depicted the desired image of reverential care so carefully created throughout the day (but they could not film the ignominious hoisting of the coffin as if it were just another piece of cargo). Inside the ship, flowers decked the coffin, including the wreaths from the Italian royal family, Mussolini, the New York Fascisti, and the Italian actors of New York. A guard at the entrance barred any unauthorized persons from this artistic and political temple.

According to some reports, the Italian government forgot the living in their care for the dead. The actors of Duse's company, the chief subjects of Duse's final solicitude, were almost left stranded after all, in spite of the promises and commitments made by Mussolini (Knepler 319). No accommodations had been provided for them on the liner. These Italian actors were extraneous to Mussolini's display, perhaps even distractions from the central attraction. But the actors refused to let the body sail without them. They would not relinquish the actress body, out of sentiment, reverence, or perhaps fear of their own disappearance. Room was found for them on board, and during the voyage Duse's entire theatre company spent much of their time in the little third-class cabin with the corpse, renewing their vigil (Bordeux 304).

During Duse's trip home, d'Annunzio made another, once again written, bid for attention. He sent his original manuscripts to London for auction and announced his intention of using the money to build a great monument to Eleonora Duse. Although the *New York Times* obligingly called him "the warrior poet," the notice did not receive the

attention he desired, and it is doubtful he ever built his monument (“To Sell d’Annunzio Papers for Duse”). His intentions always read well, and if nothing else, he succeeded in memorializing his own concern.

When the ocean liner arrived in Naples on May 10th it drew just the sort of crowd Duse avoided during her life. Careful planning turned the sad homecoming into a national triumph. As the ship came into the harbor, the coffin was placed on the quarterdeck and draped with the Italian flag. There the casket lay for the prepared speeches by the politicians (Signor Lupi from the government and the Mayor of Naples) as Italian troops in formation passed by the liner. The flag on the ship flew at half-mast. At the end of the speeches, the populace surged forward to pay their respects and offer prayers. Signor Lupi, representing the Italian government then took charge of the coffin (“Duse’s Body Reaches Italy”).

The very public ceremonies continued in Rome the next day; another Duse funeral procession bore the coffin through a crowd that heaped it with flowers. Again the politicians established a symbolism of place, choosing the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli. Not only did this church belong to the royal family, it had last been used for the funeral of Italy’s Unknown Soldier. Once again, the *New York Times* reported that the nation provided new guardians for the actress body. Instead of the actors who accompanied the body home, four war widows kept a vigil over Duse’s corpse. Mussolini, the royal family, and other politicians in the cabinet sent new wreaths. These floral arrangements and the flowers from theatres and actors clubs surrounded the catafalque.

Mussolini charged the Ministry of the Interior with the responsibility of sending out the invitations to the Rome funeral mass, and the politicians worked to create the most effective show possible for the most important audience—Italy and the world. Both acknowledging and exploiting Duse’s international stature, the government filled the church with foreign diplomats, including the American ambassador and the entire

embassy staff. After the mass, the doors of the church were opened, and 100,000 Italians paid tribute to Duse's body as the representatives of the world watched ("Roman Throngs").

Afterward, placed on an open train car decorated as a *chappelle ardente*, the coffin traveled to Asolo. Ten war heroes wearing medals now watched over the actress's body. At every station on the return journey, crowds awaited the train. Waiting dignitaries and mourners met the coffin with more speeches and banners in Florence, Bologna, and Padua.

At last they reached the town of Asolo, where Eleonora had her home. In a final funeral service, Signor Lupi (the government representative who also spoke in Naples) delivered an oration saluting Italy's greatest actress on behalf of all of Italy ("Duse Buried at Asolo"). After working so hard for the Italian government, representing responsibility/security to her acting troupe, and inspiring the devotion of thousands, Duse's body came to rest at last in the quiet place she had once thought of so fondly.

In events precipitated by d'Annunzio and orchestrated by Mussolini, the Italian government took advantage of genuine sorrow at the passing of a remarkable individual to court international favor for its regime and to consolidate internal solidarity as well. D'Annunzio later received more tangible rewards. He became increasingly negligible as a political force, but Mussolini valued him enough as a symbol (both in his own right and as a living link to Duse) to give him a title and commission a national edition of his works.

That the government and not the theatre community took control of honoring this actress demonstrates the value Mussolini and the Fascists placed on the ceremony. At a time when Mussolini started his ascent to the zenith of power, Duse's death gave him the opportunity to display benevolence and an appreciation of Italian culture. Her international reputation fit his need for positive international attention perfectly.

In her study of Renaissance funerals, Jennifer Woodward describes how the wide range of social groups and the number of mourners indicated the deceased's rank (17). Duse's mourners included Italian royalty, the military, and people off the streets; and they numbered in the tens of thousands. Mussolini displayed the range of classes with the procession in New York and the open church in Rome. The number and range of her mourners symbolized not only Duse's importance but the unity of the Italian people. The forlorn sadness of Duse's death in Pittsburgh became a chance for the politicians to frame the repatriation of her body as an epic production with a cast of thousands. Mussolini successfully promoted nationalist fervor in the new nation by showcasing a source of pride.

Yet, unlike those of Renaissance monarchs, Duse's obsequies transcended national boundaries. Her international stardom made her body more powerful, more desirable as a national symbol. In a transitional time when international travel could be reliably scheduled and undertaken without undue hazard, considerations of time and money still made foreign countries seem remote. Duse built her international legend on the mystique of foreignness. Whether in Paris or Baltimore she spoke Italian, and, though the Norwegian, French, and German dramas confirmed her status as a world artist, in America these plays also emphasized her foreignness.

At one point the politicians intended to disregard Duse's wishes and bury her body in Santa Croce with other illustrious Italians. When the mayor of Asolo publicly granted Duse's request to be buried there in the town, he perhaps forestalled that eventuality by publicizing Duse's own desires. Behind the scenes, Duse's friends tried to ensure some remnants of her agency and possibly pressured the politicians or took the story to the press. The body of one of their own had been snatched away from them. They wanted Duse's body back, and they had Duse's own words to convince the politicians. The politicians agreed to release the body, perhaps deciding that directly

contravening Duse's written request would diminish the nationalist glow. Or were the politicians simply finished with the body?

Perhaps the actress body eventually became superfluous or even dangerous. What if Duse's actor friends protested a burial in Santa Croce and revealed Duse's disappointment with Mussolini, or how an American came to her aid financially when no one in her own country would? The politicians kept what mattered, the symbol, and let the body go to Asolo. They invoked the symbolic Duse at the next meeting of parliament on June 3, when Paola Orano and Mussolini praised Duse as an actress and as a patriot ("Italian Chamber Sits in Comparative Calm"). Duse's support for the Fascist government, uncertain and doubtful in life, became unequivocal and resounding in death.

Mussolini's and d'Annunzio's eagerness to associate themselves with the dead actress tapped into the very roots of patriotism, the nation's signifiers. As Benedict Anderson points out, nationalism is a recent development, fostering an imagined political community that serves as a needed object of belief (7). As with any faith, symbols loom large in nationalist documents and events. Italy, first united in the late nineteenth century, stood in particular need of heroes, icons, and unifying events. D'Annunzio rhetorically announced and Mussolini successfully speculated that Duse could become a powerful symbol of Italian pride before the entire world; it was hoped that her burial might unite the country in a public performance of mourning.

Duse's rapid transition from actress to icon fits in with nationalism's frequent use of women's images. Representing a territory as an attractive woman blends two types of passionate possessive male desires. Whether framed in pictures, cast as statues, or stamped on coinage, women became emblematic of the imagined nation. The familiar figures of Britannia and Lady Liberty belong to an extensive tradition that includes Finland's Aura, Norway's Nore, and Iceland's Fjallkonan (Lady of the Mountains). D'Annunzio, Mussolini, and the Italian Fascist party merely switched the object of this

emotion from an allegorical female to Duse, whose fame made her an object of reverence and whom death made as remote as any graven image.

D'Annunzio and Mussolini saw Duse's burial moment as an opportunity to create a surrogate Duse. Their plans had little to do with honoring an artist and everything to do with politics and international publicity. Together they made Duse's funeral obsequies a pageant of national pride across two countries and an ocean. The idea of Duse became a unifying icon for the Italian people. The circumstances favored the romantic narrative they created. Nationally and internationally the story of La Duse and her death far from her beloved country became a popular theme. Duse, lost to the Italian people through travel and death, could be restored in body and in honor. The Italians could claim this star that all the world honored. Many of Mussolini's arrangements provided evidence both of the tribute of the world and of Italy's ultimate claim on this treasure. Mussolini took this chance to appear as a man of culture and sentiment.

In life, Duse served her country as an ambassador of art; in death, she became a political declaration of the preeminence of Italian culture. Alive, Duse resisted becoming a celebrity sign and believed that she could both perform and transcend Italianness by the power of truth. Dead, her body gave an unprecedented performance of nationalism under government direction.

Duse's loss of agency in death became visible when showmanship replaced her reticence. Her burial became a moment that distinguished her country—worldwide, Italy became the country of Duse. Her own values persisted only in the quietest of ways. She came at last to rest in the peace of her chosen burial place with a small group of her intimates to pay tribute to her artistry (though even here, the government representative made an appearance). The unobtrusive nature of these elements in the burial cavalcade matched her reticence in public life. The quietude she expected in

death eluded her at her burial, kept in abeyance by the veneration and maneuverings of both the political and the theatrical factions.

## Conclusion

“Their lives . . . remain indelible and will not by simple death be undone. They live still, and importantly, in all but the most literal ways.”—Richard Ford

Actress burials speak to current issues: gender construction, cultural disjunctions, power relations, and other operations of culture and identity. Actresses are women writ large. A culture's treatment of them in death may reveal attitudes about women and theatre hidden from view under less stressful circumstances.

Each actress in this study had her own drama of identity and a varying degree of agency in the contestation of her burial moment. Tracy Davis asserts that theatre history should turn to the latest historical methods and deal with populations rather than individuals (40). But statistical analysis of groups blurs individual identities, and, far from recovering women's history, runs the risk of erasing women's extraordinary achievements from the historical record. Indeed, a history that looks only at women in the aggregate seems to threaten a new marginalization, omitting women deemed not representative of the group as a whole. Individual actresses asserted their positions within the culture through their careers, their letters, their memoirs, and their bodies. Ignoring their voices sidelines these actresses and their valuable contributions to our understanding of the past. We must continue to complicate and enrich our history with the inclusion of the unusual as well as the ordinary.

Of necessity my contribution to a history of actress burials is highly selective. Each chapter focuses on one major contestation because, in each case, one cultural institution emerged as most important in the determination of the disposition of the actress body. However, other cultural forces were always at work, and I have tried to complicate the picture by including these whenever possible. Of special interest is the way in which the contestation chosen as the focus for one chapter underlies and informs the other chapters, especially for actresses from the same period. In a reversal of my chapter themes, I allude to the social mobility of Lecouvreur and the church's



attitude towards Oldfield, to Bernhardt's national symbolism and to Duse's public image. For the sake of clarity I subordinate these factors to the main argumentative line of the central contestation over the actress body.

Further work could be done on these reversed contestations. For instance, the tension between Bernhardt's Jewish heritage and her place in the French Pantheon would reward much closer scrutiny, including an examination of her role in that real life drama of the suffering body, the Dreyfus affair. The degree of Duse's agency in the cultivation of her Garbo-like fame as a solitary artist could be further deconstructed in the context of the shifting status of women in the twentieth century.

Other opportunities to further the exploration begun here may be found in the linkages and spaces. Almost two hundred years passed between the death of Oldfield and the death of Bernhardt. A few of the unique actress burials that occurred during that time are mentioned elsewhere in this dissertation. Rachel, who frightened and inspired Bernhardt, died in 1858. Rachel M. Brownstein describes that funeral as "a forum for interpretations" (24). Politics, social class, art, and image all intertwined in this funeral too. In an obvious attempt at funeral appropriation, Jules Janin, a critic, wrote an essay ostensibly about the burial but actually a paean to the past and his own faithfulness to the good (26). Carolina Neuber, buried by stealth in 1760, clashed with the church by her profession and also defied gender expectations by her work as a theatre manager. In 1815 Mlle. Raucourt's funeral became the site of a dramatic confrontation between a priest and her admirers when he unsuccessfully tried to bar the actress body from his church (Truc 217).

All of these burial moments offer possibilities for further investigation of cultural contestations. For this initial investigation I chose those burials that promised to yield the richest harvest of meaning, but all the possibilities looked fruitful. These four offered the clearest and best documented contestations, the most dramatic circumstances, and they were neatly paired in time. History bifurcates this dissertation, examining two

actresses who died in the eighteenth century, and two who died in the twentieth century.

For Lecouvreur and Oldfield, the relative novelty of a woman in a public profession created the conditions that made their deaths events of such importance. The confluence of misogynistic and antitheatrical prejudice doomed Lecouvreur's body to obliteration, while the acknowledgement of power newly voiced by an actress exalted Anne Oldfield's corpse. Over time, the shock of the new would lessen and play less of a role in the disposition of actress bodies.

The timing of Lecouvreur's burial moment placed her body at the mercy of clerics who realized that theatre brought alien ideas into the society and encouraged the mixing of classes. They responded by strict enforcement of the boundaries. The French church showed its inflexibility in its unwillingness to admit an actress body. This culturally pathological reaction to exclude was symptomatic of an institution in trouble, an institution unprepared to adjust to the rapid changes that would arrive with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.

Anne Oldfield also died in a time of change, but the custody of her body devolved on a group determined to predict and benefit from any shifts in the society. Just as Oldfield positioned herself to enjoy the best life available to a talented actress in her society, even so the Whigs maneuvered themselves to take advantage of her cultural memory after her death.

By the twentieth century, the novelty of actresses gave way to its opposite; familiarity. Instead of their existence, their immediacy captured public attention. In an era of changing gender roles their status as public women continued to trouble the boundary keepers. But the media penetration newly added to the role made actresses more public than ever before, while international travel gave them an audience no longer confined within the borders of their own countries.

Although it is difficult to accurately assess all that international tours implied, one effect meant that actress death and burial became of interest to a larger public. These developments also increased the accessibility of actresses who could be seen, not only in person, but in widely distributed reproductions. The death of someone daily read about and often glimpsed in photographs or even on movie screens established a connection that could be observed or exploited in a burial ceremony.

Bernhardt found this time perfectly suited to the creation and perpetuation of her celebrity. The fame industry that she helped originate challenged her in the portrayal of her actress body, but in the final picture Bernhardt and the press collaborated as effectively as a dead actress and an insensate media assemblage could.

The time was right for a demonstration of national pride when Duse died, and the twentieth century provided the ideal tools of image creation to construct and circulate simulacra of the actress body throughout the world. The reporters and movie cameras that covered the memorial services would become an expected part of national commemorations and memorials and their presence at Duse's funeral indicates both the cultural power and the political nature of the event.

The cultural power of the actress body itself is central to my argument, and a dissertation that focuses so strongly on female bodies lays itself open to the charge of essentialism, that the study assumes a fundamental quality of some kind distinguishable in the female body. While the justification for my study rests on a contention that actress bodies were treated differently from the bodies of men and non-actress women, that does not imply a reduction to biological characteristics, or to an indefinable female essence. However, much of my argument describes how a belief in an essential difference came to be culturally constructed. Although these pages bear witness to the social construction of gender by institutions ranging from the church to the state, they also treat the actress body as a special entity whose public display of femaleness affects its fate. Often the cultural discourse assumes the woman is visible

through the actress, and conflates all women and all actresses into one entity. Femaleness becomes embedded in everything that happens to an actress. Of course the category of femaleness is culturally constructed and serves ideological purposes. But any distinction so thoroughly lived must be discussed. If we cannot mention bodies, we are silenced.

Bodies present a further complication in contemporary theory. What constitutes a body? Corporeal existence becomes increasingly irrelevant in discourses that stress the social construction of the body. My discussion of how institutions create their own narrative in the burial space may be read as supporting the notion of a bodiless body. Yet at some point in an actress burial, someone must cope with the physical fact of a body. The stern measures the church used to destroy the material remains of Lecouvreur, and the extraordinary measures Bernhardt took to preserve a record of her physical identity, demonstrate the potential intransigence of the corporeal. Further work should be done on the theoretical implications of the bodies in actress burials.

Actress burials today occur without contestations of the magnitude that I describe because of changes in the cultural position of actresses. I stated at the beginning of this study that all actresses share the ability to disturb society and that this makes their burials of particular interest. Yet to some extent, that quality is an historical survival based on antitheatrical prejudice and misogynistic distrust of the actress. Or in some cases, like that of Marilyn Monroe, the effect on the society seems a remnant of the era when famous actresses traveled throughout the country and the world unifying their audiences in a lived performance of admiration.

Not since the death of Marilyn Monroe has there been an actress burial in any way comparable to those in this study. Monroe's death captured the imagination of the world in a media blitz equal to and perhaps surpassing the coverage of Bernhardt's obsequies. Not surprisingly, this had less to do with her profession than with her image. Monroe is an American icon whose early death revealed the dysfunction of a society

that fetishized female sexuality. Her public created her as an embodied dream of desire. Her death disrupted the system by revealing what can happen to a woman who internalizes that image and the burden of representing sex for millions of strangers.

Currently, few, if any, actresses possess the iconic power to provoke an institution to attempt their suppression or assimilation in the burial moment. In an age overstocked with post-Warholian fifteen-minute celebrities, the mere criterion of publicity-induced familiarity is not enough to stir public emotion. Nor do our most famous actresses provide the thrill of human contact and living energy. Actresses no longer play an important enough symbolic role in the society to evoke a major reaction from the public. Live theatre reaches a much smaller proportion of the population than it did in the early twentieth century, while movies and television lack the immediacy needed for human connection. The celebrity conferred by the media creates icons, but the rapid proliferation of almost interchangeable stars works against the canonization of any one actress. Perhaps Julie Andrews or Julia Roberts approach that level of star power, but even they seem to lack the cultural importance of earlier actresses. Of course, only a tragic event could prove or disprove this assessment.

Death always disrupts, but those whose death evokes the most extreme social response does change. Too few people in our society emotionally connect with actresses for their deaths to have their former impact on the public. They no longer serve as surrogates for our longings. The days are past when Lecouvreur represented passion, when Oldfield embodied social elevation. No longer do we have a Bernhardt to satisfy the dark desire to kill the woman (and have her too). No nation today has a Duse for its representative. The fault lines of contemporary culture lie elsewhere.

So who are the new surrogates for public emotion? Those who possess the necessary qualifications of familiarity and a perceived accessibility, an ability to make us feel good about them. Politicians rarely garner such warm feelings; John F. Kennedy had the last state funeral in this country that provided a spectacle of public grief similar

to actress funerals. Instead, the individuals who seem to be the public's chosen surrogates fall in between the categories of performers and politicians. Those we most admire are those who perform a media generated role with empathetic grace and seem to care about human suffering. When these people die, our adoption of them as our surrogates makes the loss familial.

In recent years, the two deaths that best exemplify this trend are those of Princess Diana and John F Kennedy, Jr. Princess Diana wanted to be Britain's ambassador to the world. Though she was never officially confirmed in that title, British grief at her death crowned her as the Queen of Hearts the tabloids had dubbed her years before. John F. Kennedy Jr. did even less to establish himself as an important figure in public life. He was a magazine editor and lawyer, it was the notability of his family that guaranteed him constant media coverage and created a halo effect. When he died, the United States mourned his lost potential, and many felt his death as the loss of a family member.

These are people honored less for their deeds than for their myths. Kennedy's untimely death echoed that of his father for many. Interestingly, one antecedent for Princess Diana's burial was that of Princess Grace of Monaco. Princess Grace's funeral could be studied as a cultural transition from the impact of actress burials to media darlings less occupationally defined. As someone who wed into a fairytale and died in a car crash, the Princess Grace burial parallels that of Princess Diana in myth-generating ways. As Harry Garlick writes of Princess Diana's funeral, "If the myth to be ritualized at a state funeral is right, then the ritual will cut directly through to the deep emotional pulse of that specific group" (229). These funerals were more about the dreams of the mourners than the lives of the deceased. Funerals are always about the survivors, but in the case of these cultural surrogates, the exigency provokes an immediate quest for meaning.

As I claimed, the death of the acting surrogate creates a crisis for cultural institutions. Those most directly affected responded quickly to turn the burial moment to their advantage and create a narrative that will reinscribe their values on the actress body. I have shown how different texts contended in the space created by the burial moment and how the treatment of the actress body may be read as the text of the controlling institution. In the cases of Lecouvreur and Oldfield I have described how the burial text provoked the proliferation of even more texts, each with a narrative of meaning.

I have also documented how the tension created by the living actress is not dissipated by her death, but is, if anything, increased. The need to channel this disruptive energy prompts institutions to insinuate themselves into the burial moment in an effort to co-opt or suppress the actress body and its place in the cultural memory.

This study reveals how actress burials transform actress bodies into narratives of cultural beliefs. This examination offers insights about which institutions historically tried to suppress theatre and which institutions collaborated with it, and their degree of success or failure. These burial dramas display compelling instances of the often violent and usually vociferous cultural reaction to women in theatre. These specifics add new information to theatre history, as well as suggesting new directions for future research.

Somewhat unexpectedly, I think I succeeded in keeping the actresses in the frame. Their energy persisted throughout the burial and writing process. Although they could not control their burials, their words and deeds repeatedly surfaced in the contending narratives.

To conclude, these burial moments hold far more than just actress bodies.

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