During my Master’s program I took a course on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century portraiture in which I wrote a paper about portraits of actresses. Several years later, I found myself returning to the topic while pursuing an independent study course, HART 601, with my advisor, Dr. Costello, spring semester of 2014. I was drawn to several portraits of British actresses during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Painted by leading artists such as Sir Joshua Reynolds and William Beechey, these paintings depicted the figures of some of the most alluring actresses of the day, the most famous of which was Sarah Siddons, who became one of the first publicly celebrated actresses and helped remove some of the stigma surrounding the profession. What I found particularly intriguing about these images was the inclusion, and often repetition, of the theatrical mask in the picture. It was so overt and over-emphasized that it appeared forced at times. I endeavored to explore how the theatrical mask could be a visual placeholder for subtle anxieties that were stirred when a male artist had to contend with a female actress.

To begin, I needed to understand more about the actress as a figure and the history of theater. Through OneSearch I found that Fondren has an excellent collection of theater history books. Texts like Gill Perry’s *The First Actresses* and John Brewer’s *Pleasures of the Imagination* helped explain how closely tied the theater and prostitution were throughout the majority of the eighteenth century. This research also led me to speculate on how the actress’s ties to prostitution might figure into masquerade culture, which also used masks as a predominant symbol. The extremely popular pastime was predicated upon a slippage of identities and even genders. Fondren has many books about eighteenth-century gender relations that proved invaluable to setting up the cultural context for my work. Of particular note is Terry Castle’s *The Female Thermometer* in which she calls the eighteenth century a “culture of travesty,” meaning disguise and false appearances ruled society. Certain events, like the masquerade, encouraged identity fluctuation and fluidity. However, this does not mean that a predilection for self-transformation was free from sanction or repercussion. Fondren’s collection
of eighteenth-century literature, particularly texts like Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, provided examples of how anxieties surrounding the slippage between identities manifested themselves in a variety different spheres. Fondren’s holdings helped me explain the existence of a dichotomy and double standard in which some situations permitted self-transformation and flexibility of identity, while others required control and stability.

Having gained a solid foundation in the historical and cultural context of the theater and masquerade in general, it was paramount to shift my focus to the individual actresses pictured and the art of portraiture as a genre. It became clear at this point that I wanted to examine how this duality manifested itself within two of the sister arts: theatre and painting. Not only was a distinction of gender at stake, but also a question of medium and its affectivity. Articles found through JStor, the Bibliography of the History of Art, Art Source, and Eighteenth Century Collection Online were of the utmost importance to this project. I would not have had the relevant scholarly materials from which to demonstrate my individual take on these images had I not had access to these collections of journals. Several of these databases were new to me. By using the library’s Research Guides, I discovered Art Source and Eighteenth Century Collections Online, the latter of which provided contemporary reviews of the actresses’ performances, some even written by women. They revealed that actresses like Siddons could be particularly dangerous because they had the ability to profoundly influence the audience’s emotions, bringing both men and women to weep.

One of the ways the library was most helpful to me during this project came not in the form of a database, search engine, or book, but rather in the form of a living human being. Among the many books that Fondren’s ILL services provided me, one in particular became a frequently consulted source – *A Passion for Performance: Sarah Siddons and her Portraitists*, edited by Robyn Aselson. I approached Jet Prendeville, the art librarian, to inquire whether it would be possible for the library to purchase a copy of this book for our collection, so that I did not need to continually re-ILL it. Jet was supremely accommodating and more than willing to find an affordable copy to purchase for Fondren. I was very pleased to meet and converse with Jet and will return to her for resource needs in the future, as I move into dissertation work.

To strengthen my argument in linking gender dichotomies to medium dichotomies, I needed to demonstrate how the larger institutions of the theater and the Royal Academy helped propagate power relations between artist and actress. Therefore, I consulted artistic and theatrical
discourses. Both acting treatises, particularly those of David Garrick, and Sir Joshua Reynolds’
public lectures at the Academy professed a foundational hierarchies. Fondren’s collection of
theater history and art historical theory fulfilled both these needs. Distinctions between genres of
Comedy and Tragedy in the theater reflected similar distinctions between different genres and
styles of painting. For both Reynolds and Garrick, these meticulous divisions were necessary
because art affected audiences, who in turn affected the well-being of the entire nation.

ArtStor’s collection of high-quality images and its wonderful zoom capabilities allowed
me to discover more masks hidden in the shadows of certain images than I had seen in either the
reproductions in books or through Google Images. These masks paradoxically reveal issues and
anxieties of duality within the cultures of eighteenth-century visual and performing arts. Their
emphatic presence in portraits of actresses – a unique genre that simultaneously blended and
challenged the distinctions between the two arts – suggests that artists were aware of these
arbitrary oppositions and used the mask as a visual tool to deal with them. Fondren’s digital and
personal resources allowed me to delve into the rich issues of medium and genre distinction
within the sister arts, gender and identity relations, as well as the aesthetic discourses of both
fields. I find myself profoundly fortunate to be able to conduct research at a library like Fondren,
where the resources in place are so extensive and where the staff are so generous.