Abstract

**Duality and the Mask**

in Eighteenth-Century Actress Portraits

Theatrical masks in portraits of eighteenth-century actresses signify more than the figure’s profession. Multiple masks in a single composition and the figure’s active engagement with these plastic, yet eerily human objects suggest a more complex relationship between the theatrical mask and portraiture. Many scholars have examined eighteenth-century British actress portraits as tools by which the sitter elevated her reputation and distanced herself from associations with prostitution. Yet the presence of the theatrical mask in portraits by Joshua Reynolds, John Hoppner, and William Beechey, for example, has received no critical attention. Quantity, placement, and interaction between actress and object indicate metaphorical significance and demand examination. I argue the mask acts as a marker of duality and potential deception, becoming the locus for anxieties within the sister arts of theatre and painting. Artistic and dramatic theorists were in the process of codifying each medium based upon strict categories and dichotomies. Yet the actress’s proclivity for deception spilled onto the canvas, requiring artistic intervention. As such, the mask was a site of artistic and social anxiety, where gender norms, aesthetic principles, and power relations were visually negotiated.
In many ways display was the dominant social mode in eighteenth-century English society. Men and women were consciously aware of their fashion and consistently compared it to others’ appearances. The ostentatious and narcissistic dandy or macaroni, growing trends for make up and elaborate hairstyles, as well as decadent dining spectacles reigned in this era. Public display of self at any social event – be it a ball, a dinner, or an outing to the theatre – centered upon seeing and being seen. Even one’s private life was a form of exhibition, for privacy was twofold: one version was closed off and concealed, and one constructed for the benefit of others.

Even more, Terry Castle calls the eighteenth century, especially in London, a “culture of travesty,” in which disguise and false appearances ruled society.¹ 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. Anxieties surrounding the slippage between identities manifested themselves in many different spheres. For example, societal norms demanded a woman’s identity be firmly established, for while still the weaker sex, she also harbored a dangerous side within her. A dichotomy and double standard existed in which some situations permitted self-transformation and flexibility of identity, while

others required control and stability. This dialectic is especially visible in the late eighteenth century when Enlightenment principles of categorization struggled against libertinism and an emerging Romanticism.

In particular, I will examine how this duality manifested itself within two of the sister arts: theatre and painting. The eighteenth-century British actress’s profession epitomized the malleable identity. Her social status, the theatre’s ties to prostitution, and her ability to persuade and influence audiences meant that her duality had to be closely monitored. Public opinion about actresses continually oscillated between praise and censure. In addition, theatrical discourse professed a foundational dichotomy between the genres of Comedy and Tragedy. Within the visual arts, Joshua Reynolds’s attempt to codify artistic technique and aesthetics reflects similar divisions within genres and styles of painting. Reynolds’s meticulous distinctions were an attempt to create a nationalistic art that could disseminate virtue and morals. In her study of theatrical portraiture and flirtation, Gill Perry argues that the close relationship between theatre and art in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries meant that developments in one genre typically affected or mirrored changes in the other. In both the theatre and art were believed to hold influence over their audiences, therefore it was important to identify and control their inherent dualisms. In the late eighteenth century, these two issues converged in the theatrical portrait of the actress.

The theatre portrait and the rise of the actor and actress as celebrities in this period have been widely discussed. However, the reoccurring symbol of the theatrical mask in many of the

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actress portraits has received no critical attention. Of course, the mask was an archetypal symbol reaching back to the Greek theatre tradition and marked the sitter’s profession. Nevertheless, the placement of the mask and the figure’s interaction with it demand more attention. For example, in John Hoppner’s *Mrs Jordan as the Comic Muse* (1786), one sees the famous comedienne holding a mask away from her body (Figure 1). Mrs. Jordan’s active engagement with the mask demonstrates that it is not simply a sign of her profession. She gently holds the mask, almost touching its lips as she extends it far away from the leering satyr. Furthermore, a second mask lies face up on the ground in the bottom left corner. Both objects display closed lips and emotionless features making it difficult to discern whether these should be deemed masks of comedy or tragedy. The duplication of the mask is also apparent in William Beechey’s portrait *Sarah Siddons with the Emblems of Tragedy* from 1793 (Figure 2). Beechey shows the most famous tragedienne of the age with two of the traditional symbols for tragedy, the mask and the dagger. The perfect profile of the mask placed just in front of Siddons’s face creates an eerie double. If she but turned her face, one imagines the two would line up nearly perfectly, especially considering the disguise’s strong aquiline nose, reminiscent of Siddons’s own distinguishing feature.

How does our understanding of these images and their social context change, if we consider the mask as more than just a reference to the theatre? Using the anthropological meaning of the mask as a marker of duality and potential deception or disguise opens the door for investigating the mask as a metonymic symbol for larger societal issues concerning indeterminacy, identity slippage, and codification. I propose that by focusing our attention more intently on the mask, we can uncover late-eighteenth-century anxieties concerning dichotomies.

within the theatre, perceptions of the actress, and Reynoldsian aesthetics and practices. One must consider questions of agency: is the mask an active or passive object? Dominance or interaction: why do both figures hold the mask away from their bodies? And quantity: if it were simply a sign of the actress’s profession, why would the artist include more than one in the composition? Artistic decisions like these demand an examination of this object’s symbolic weight. I contend that in portraits 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.

Improper Feminine Spaces: The Theatre and the Masquerade

Throughout the eighteenth century the theatre and acting were associated with loose morals, a lower-class carnivalesque lifestyle, and improper sexual practices, including cross-dressing. Most actresses made their livings through a professional circuit of theatres. They played in a variety of productions across the country, often on temporary stages in makeshift, ad-hoc venues. It was an unstable and often unpredictable profession that meant permanent residence was rarely a possibility. Although this nomadic behavior was a professional necessity, its association with other mobile, marginal groups like gypsies, vagabonds, and thieves caused the theatre to be stigmatized. Using a pejorative term in his title, William Hogarth’s 1738 print, *Strolling Actresses Dressing in a Barn*, exaggerates these negative characteristics society feared about the actress (Figure 3). In typical Hogarthian fashion, the space appears tight and confined: the numerous figures and their horde of objects are crammed in so tightly that the barn is almost
bursting at the seams. The hole in the dilapidated roof threatens to tear open even wider under pressure from bodies and goods. The viewer has difficulty making sense of the scene, for Hogarth allows no visual order here, only chaos. Amidst the profusion of objects one observes props, stage backdrops, costumes, and makeup. This makeshift, temporary area must serve multiple functions for the actresses. It is both backstage, dressing room, and prop closet. Most notably, this barn is swarming with women. It is almost exclusively a feminine space. Even the figure on the left with sideburns appears to be a cross-dressing woman – the long, wavy hair looking much more natural than wig-like. These actresses are in the process of putting on their stage masks. As Perry says, they are “in the act of dressing up.”⁴ They transform their facial features, hairstyles, even genders. They seem to have no stable identity, instead simply transitioning from one outrageous role, costume, and set to the next. Hogarth distributed this print just one year after Parliament passed the Licensing Act that required theatrical companies to have royal patents in order to perform legally. This measure was an effort to control strolling companies from spreading immorality and possibly anarchistic sentiments among citizens.⁵ Hogarth satirizes the legislative act by playing on these fears. Disorder reigns and the viewer sees how easily the actress can deceptively transform herself. We are offered a glimpse behind the theatrical mask.

The spatial disorder and insecure gender identity displayed in Hogarth’s print reveal the longevity of a public debate about the masquerade in which some of the main issues focused on cross-dressing and proper behavior for the sexes. As a type of public theatre, the masquerade allowed each person to be an actor for the evening, playing a role and wearing a mask and costume. Often a very large event held at a theatre, hall, or pleasure garden, the London

⁵ Perry, The First Actresses, 21.
masquerade was a dominant social fixture. Like many popular pursuits of the higher social ranks, critics denounced the practice in the media. In 1756 female journalist Frances Brooke called the masquerade a “confused mixture of different ranks [that was] unavoidable.” Society essentially broke down at the masquerade; familiarity and order were exchanged for confusion and ambiguity. Many anti-masquerade voices in eighteenth-century London feared the same types of moral degeneracy that Hogarth caricatured in his print. Only ten years before Hogarth issued his print, Henry Fielding published his first poem, *The Masquerade*, in 1728. The poem attempts to reveal the dangers associated with the custom, and Fielding gives particular emphasis to the role of disguising. The space is disordered: “In wild Confusion huddled lies / A Heap of Incoherencies; / So here, in one Confusion hurl’d, / Seem all the Nations of the World.” Confusion and incoherency become dominating agents capable of action; they can huddle, heap, and hurl. Rationality fails. Fielding suggests even nationalistic markers and categorizations are lost at the masquerade.

The fearful cross-dressing activities enjoyed at masquerades take center stage in Fielding’s poem when he writes: “For when Men Women turn – why then / May Women not be chang’d to Man?” Not only can women conceal their gender but he also suggests that men are in danger of becoming effeminate. The masquerade was a spectacle of voyeurism and display based upon a power relationship that lurked beneath the masks. On the one hand, a participant created a self-image meant for someone else’s viewing pleasure. As long as heteronormative power relations were maintained, the masquerade did not threaten any fundamental societal order,

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7 Quoted in Carter, 65. Originally from Mary Singleton, *Old Maid*, no. 11, 24 (January 1756), no page numbers. Frances Brooke wrote the periodical under the persona of Mary Singleton, a spinster. It was published weekly from November 15, 1755 to July 4, 1756 and had a total of 37 issues. For more on this text see Iona Italia, *The Rise of Literary Journalism in the Eighteenth Century: Anxious Employment* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
8 *Miscellaneous Works of the Late Dr. Arbuthnot: Volume 2* (London: W. Richardson and L. Urquhart, 1770), 5-6. Hereafter cited as MW.
besides the obvious problems of luxury and excess. On the other hand, the mask and masquerade offered participants, especially females, the opportunity to undermine dominant gender roles and power relations. Even the most basic social binary – gender distinctions – could be concealed. It was believed that the female character had a tendency toward self-display and deception, therefore the masquerade provided an occasion for women to allow their natural immoralities to reign unchecked.

Prints like *Lady Betty Bustle* and *The Macaroni* reveal the narcissism behind masquerade activity, and, more importantly, they showcase gender confusion – the similarities between effeminate male and duplicitous female on full display (Figures 4 and 5). The viewer has access to both of their interior toilettes immediately creating a voyeuristic context. Within this space, peripheral objects help to conflate identity. Ostentatious wigs and fashionable decorations mark both bodies as theatrical and deceptive. The various perfume bottles on the dandy’s table correspond to the box of hidden face paints and scents behind which the maid’s hands disappear; these are the elements that form their disguises. Furthermore, the eponymous title – Lady Bustle – that includes a piece of clothing, signals the conflation of object and individual. The masquerade mask she holds in her hand suggests an imminent switch in identity. Stark color contrasts between white face and black mask also suggest a transition from morality to immorality. Even the reflections on the wall sconces in the background sustain a visual and metaphoric dichotomy: that on the left nearest the mask shows a diagonal or skewed reflection, while that on the right nearest the woman’s natural face displays a vertical or upright reflection. The most basic of artistic marks, line and color, carry ideological weight, warning viewers of the moral dangers that will occur if one wears a mask and slips between identities.
Masks, masquerades, theatres and actresses were all parts of a dualistic eighteenth-century British culture, which simultaneously reveled in disguise and the ability to transform one’s identity and admonished the immoral libertine freedom these behaviors encouraged. The oscillation between sanctioned and unacceptable masking hinged on gender relations. If the female disguised herself to become a pleasure object for the male gaze, masking caused little societal disturbance except to extreme moral reformers. But if the female changed her identity to purposefully deceive a man thereby upsetting dominant power relations, then masking became problematic and a source of male anxiety.

Henry Fielding’s 1749 novel The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling offers a very clear literary example of the masquerade mask’s ability to objectify its wearer. When the titular anti-hero attends a masquerade, Fielding lets the mask become the dominant subject capable of movement, action, and speech. He writes, “The mask walked hastily to the upper end of the innermost apartment before she spoke.” Jones takes “the mask by the hand,” and later the mask is said to answer a question. And finally: “While Jones and his mask were walking together about the room … he observed his lady speak to several masks, with the same freedom of acquaintance as if they had been barefaced.”

Throughout the entire masquerade scene, Fielding conflates the object with the female figure behind it. In a sense the two become one entity, but it is never clear which is dominant. Sometimes the disguise envelops the woman’s entire identity so that it is the inanimate object that speaks, walks, and holds hands. At other times, Fielding oscillates between the two. In essence, the object becomes a metonymic symbol for a woman who changes her identity. In the last example, the disguise and its female wearer are interchangeable within the same sentence. At first Jones walks with his mask, then he sees his lady speak to several masks. This linguistic freedom to move seamlessly from one term to the

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next mirrors the ease with which the mask allowed its wearer to transform her identity. By referring to women as masks, Fielding attempts to suppress their individual identities and sees them only as objects. However, each time there is a change in terminology, one sees the breakdown in which duality becomes problematic, and Fielding must re-objectify the women in an effort to re-establish a male authorial dominance. When Jones sees a group of masks conversing “with the same freedom of acquaintance as if they had been barefaced,” the reader understands the degree to which masquerade was a constructed form of display. The women do know one another, but Jones was not privy to this knowledge, so their familiarity with one another jars him. There is a moment where the once distinct identities merge – mask and real person become one. This scene reveals woman’s potential to purposefully deceive, to do so in groups, and instantiates the move from object to troublesome subject.  

In her text *Masquerade and Gender*, Catherine Craft-Fairchild identifies two predominant categories of masquerade under which secondary scholars tend to group texts of the period. One views female disguise as submission to dominant norms, and the other sees it as a form of resistance to such codes. Craft-Fairchild seeks to question the rigidity of this dichotomy and uses her analyses to show the complexity of eighteenth-century femininity. Like Craft-Fairchild, I neither want to defend nor destroy any binary distinctions in which the theatrical mask participates. Rather, I want to identify the mask in images of actresses as a site of social anxiety about categorization and self-definition in general. The acting profession’s and women’s ties to the masquerade scene, with its myriad possibilities for identity transformation, only

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10 Another literary example of masquerading and social distortion is Eliza Haywood’s *Fantomina; or Love in a Maze* (1725) in which the main character decides to change her identity through the masquerade, creating personas of different social standing in order to climb the social ranks. Even at the end of the novel, we are never told her real name or “true” identity.
strengthens the cultural context for considering the ambiguous but normatively important relationship a viewer would have had in front of these paintings.

Hoppner’s *Mrs Jordan* provides the female subject multiple identities and is reminiscent of a masquerade scene in which attendees donned costumes (Figure 1). Jordan holds one mask away from her body and another lies at her feet in the bottom left corner. Because Jordan was known as a comedic actress, her portraits tend toward the more playful. Hoppner presents her as the lighthearted Thalia, Greek muse of comedy. Dressed all’antica, she and her female companion impishly reject the satyr’s leering advances. The viewer catches the women in transition from one dalliance to another; this time the object of Jordan’s gaze is the viewer. However, she does not hold all the power in this image. She has removed her mask and turned to face the viewer, who catches sight of her bare face, her seemingly true identity. This revelation puts the actress in a potentially submissive position toward the viewer.

Unlike the more playful and lighthearted picture of Mrs Jordan, Beechey’s portrait of Sarah Siddons makes a viewer question whether the figure conforms to gender standards or resists them (Figure 2). She holds the traditional symbols of tragedy, the theatrical mask and the dagger, and she stands in a rigid pose as if an object. This statuesque posture allows a male viewer to objectify the female portrait sitter. However, Beechey’s Siddons constantly threatens to break artistic and social restraints. Her body in full profile and her head in three-quarter profile hide part of her from the viewer. Physically she is not fully available to the male viewer. Furthermore, at any moment she might turn her head and place the mask to her face. If this identity does not suit her, there is a second mask at her disposal resting at the base of the pedestal. The cherub mourning at the feet of Shakespeare’s effigy can also be read in terms of
identity concealment, masquerade, and power. Not only does he conceal his face, but he also turns away from Siddons, almost as if she were a Medusa figure responsible for his immobility.

Both Hoppner’s and Beechey’s images portray women who have the power to both capture and thwart one’s gaze. They entice the viewer, but then threaten to transform themselves. The prostitute, ubiquitous in the masquerade, carried the same aura of deception and fraud. In James Gillray’s 1779 print, *The Whore’s Last Shift*, we again are invited into a woman’s private toilette, but it is a much more revealing and frightening scene (Figure 6). Having just finished her last shift, a potential innuendo that could not have gone unnoticed, this prostitute is in the middle of taking off her “mask.” She is completely naked except for an enormous wig and headpiece, ripped stockings, and the shoes on her feet. She washes her dirty undergarments, and the rest of her disguise lays crumpled in the foreground. The confusing mixture between respectable public face atop a potentially diseased prostitute body even frightens the cat in the window sill.

Prostitution was widely visible in eighteenth-century London. It was also closely associated with the actress and the theatre. In the 1600s and the first half of the following century, actresses had been considered a form of prostitute. Towards the end of the 1700s the profession of acting was undergoing a transformation from trade to art form, but the actress as a figure remained ambiguous. Was she really an honest, moral woman despite working for a living in a profession that taught her how to be a successful liar?

Prostitution and acting were also geographically linked. Because prostitutes used the theatre to seek out clients, the theatre district in the West End was renowned for its brothels and bath houses. The two major playhouses of the era where both Siddons and Jordan performed were Drury Lane and Covent Garden. These were the only theatres legally allowed to perform legitimate drama, or spoken theatre such as Shakespeare, and both had long-standing cultural
associations with prostitution. Slang terms like “Drury Lane ague” referring to syphilis and a “Drury Lane vestel,” or whore, solidified this connection. Between 1757 and 1795 an anonymously published catalogue of theatre district prostitutes appeared every year under the title *Harris’s List of Covent Garden Ladies*. It reads like a livestock auction catalogue in which each girl’s attributes and faults are listed using suggestive and erotic language. In theory and in practice, a man could go to the theatre district with his playbill in one hand and his prostitute catalogue in the other. Actresses and prostitutes moved within these same physical spaces, thus reinforcing the conflation between the two. Throughout the century there were rumors that certain actresses had been prostitutes before their stage careers. Even actresses who had never been prostitutes could be likened to harlots for their off-stage love affairs with high-class men. They were paid money to create a fantasy for their audiences, an economic exchange not very different from that of the prostitute. It was never clear what type of woman one was dealing with at the theatre. The boundaries were always fluid, or apparently fluid, which only augmented the male fantasy.

The masquerade, prostitution, acting, and the theatre were all forms of visual display and exchange that encouraged voyeurism and identity transformation. In general though, women as an entire category came under societal scrutiny. Many contemporary commentators ascribed women with a tendency toward dangerous self-display and adornment. They had a predisposition for deception that was considered an innate fixture of womanhood. In 1757 John Brown published *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times*, which participated in a public

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12 Although from the 1760s onward, with the help of David Garrick’s efforts, the theatre started to undergo a shift in which the associations between prostitution, lewd behavior, and the theatre began to break down, the long-standing cultural connections were not completely eliminated.
debate about luxury and used women as prime examples against excess. According to him, women inherently desire ornament and pleasure. They are the irrational or animal side of humanity as opposed to the rational male side. He suggests that if British society succumbs to its desires for luxury, the whole nation will become soft and effeminate. As such, a woman’s deception, and especially that of the actress or masquerade attendee who concealed her gender, threatened not only gender norms, but the economic, militaristic, and moral health of the entire nation.

To control this dangerous feminine power, society enforced strict gender norms. According to Angela Rosenthal, one norm centered upon the exchange of glances. The ideal woman did not purposefully direct her gaze toward a man or maintain the visual connection if they happened to make eye contact. The direct gaze of Siddons and Jordan in their portraits, then, implies at least one identity as an improper woman. They engage directly with the viewer, just as they do on stage. However, the sightless masks work to objectify and properly feminize the women. They are objects that can neither seek out men’s looks nor return them; in a misogynistic way, these masks can represent ideal femininity. The opposite of the female paragon, the prostitute, deceived her suitors by appearing healthy; however, behind her mask of clothing and makeup, she was morally corrupt and potentially diseased. As an equally problematic female, the actress was paid to deceive, but she practiced her craft in a socially acceptable arena making her a very amorphous creature. Because society was unable to clearly categorize or define her femininity, this ambiguity created anxiety.

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Identity Crisis: The Mask and the Actress’s Double Life

For the eighteenth-century British actress, the mask was not just an object in a painting. It was also a metaphor for the multiple roles she played both on and off stage. She had to play the theatrical character, the actress in the public eye, and the domestic woman of the home, all of which were carefully constructed and had to be played simultaneously. According to many anthropologists, masks can liberate their wearers.\textsuperscript{15} For the actress of the 1700s, her metaphorical mask, or her stage characters, offered an opportunity to express emotion and to achieve a temporary detachment from all of her off-stage identities. According to social codes, the proper woman practiced self-control. However, the audience encouraged the actress to express extreme emotion and desire on stage. Sarah Siddons, in particular, became highly successful because of her ability to seamlessly and quickly transition from one extreme emotion to another. Dorothy Jordan, likewise, became a well-known comedic actress for her seductive capabilities. In this light, the symbolic mask provides some pictorial liberation for these women. Conversely, a mask can also confine or trap its wearer into a specific identity. Whatever character the mask communicates to an audience can define the person behind the mask. According to Susan Valeria Harris Smith in her work on \textit{Masks and the Modern Drama}, “The masker signifies a double existence, for he is at once himself and someone else.”\textsuperscript{16} For the eighteenth-century actress, the stakes of her multiple personalities were very high, because every identity was on public display. As such, the masks in actress portraits call attention to this double, or even multiple, existence.

The biographical details of both Dorothy Jordan and Sarah Siddons demonstrate the complexity of their public and private identities and the difficulties they had in maintaining any

\textsuperscript{15} Susan Valeria Harris Smith, \textit{Masks in the Modern Drama} (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 2.
\textsuperscript{16} Harris Smith, 2.
distinctions between the two. Jordan was born to Irish parents who both worked on the Dublin stage. After having an illegitimate daughter in Ireland at the age of twenty, she moved to London where she began a series of affairs with various theatre managers, actors, and military officers, some of these relationships producing children. Born Dorothy Bland, she adopted the stage name “Mrs Jordan,” the implication she was married implying respectability. In 1785 she earned instant success when she began acting at Drury Lane. Critics and audiences praised her timing as a comedienne as was her willingness to perform breeches parts, or cross-dressing roles. After several relationships with various men in the theatre business, Jordan began her longest and most famous love affair with the royal prince, the Duke of Clarence, who would become King William IV. They carried on a relationship for twenty years, during which time she bore him ten children. The private love lives of Jordan and other actresses were always sensationalized in the national and satirical presses making them more susceptible to associations with prostitution.

From her correspondence we know that Jordan felt as though she were constantly battling a negative public image of herself as licentious, flirtatious, and the consummate coquette.

Sarah Siddons, on the other hand, did not experience the same criticism about her love life as Jordan did because she was married and had a legitimate family. Most often praised in the presses, she did have to contend with occasional accusations of greed. Born into the famous Kemble family of provincial actors, she grew up in the theatre business. In her late teens Siddons debuted at Drury Lane alongside David Garrick with disastrous results. Subsequently,

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19 For more on the role of the coquette and flirting with regard to actresses of the period see Gill Perry, Spectacular Flirtations: Viewing the Actress in British Art and Theatre, 1768 – 1820 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
20 Her mother, father, maternal grandfather, and eight of her brothers and sisters were all actors. Michael R. Booth, “Sarah Siddons,” in Three Tragic Actresses: Siddons, Rachel, Ristori (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 12.
she returned to the provincial acting life and several years later tested her skills on the London stage once more, this time to widespread applause and approval. From that point on, she was the unrivaled queen of tragedy on the London stage. However, some scholars have argued that the shock of her failure during her first appearance at Drury Lane left her with a lifelong sense of insecurity.  

Despite having to balance work and home, Siddons was often praised as a model wife and doting mother. A 1784 poem by Thomas Young titled *The Siddoniad: a Characteristical and Critical Poem* conveys the prevalent idea that the power with which Siddons’s portrayed her characters derived from her virtuous private life:

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But well may she assume sensations here,
Who dignifies her state in PRIVATE sphere,
The WIFE unblemish’d, and the MOTHER dear.
‘Tis FICTION which commands our stage applause,
Practice in private life adorns the cause.
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To maintain this public persona of model femininity, Siddons had to pay close attention to how she represented herself at all times. At times, this attention to character detail backfired. She was criticized for being self-absorbed and always acting, to the point that one of her associates claimed she was “always a Tragedy Queen: always acting a part even among Her own relations.”

Actress portraits invariably wrestle with a constant tension between the public and private images of their sitters. Which persona do we see in these images? Are we witnessing a struggle for power in which one personality must be suppressed? The theatrical mask becomes the symbol of these unanswerable questions. In Beechey’s portrait, the lost profiles of both mask and

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21 Booth, 15.
22 Cited in Booth as Thomas Young, *The Siddoniad* (Dublin, 1784), 15.
23 Entries of 3 January 1797 and 3 January 1800 in Garlick and Macintyre, eds., *Diary of Joseph Farington*, 3: 737 and 4: 1341. Cited in Robyn Aselson, “‘She was Tragedy Personified’: Crafting the Siddons Legend in Art and Life,” in *Passion for Performance*, 77-8.
face represent the various roles Siddons played in both public and private, all of which are, to some degree, partially hidden from view (Figure 2). The public, the audience, does not have access to every identity. Likewise, in Hoppner’s portrait of Jordan the physical body and the mask represent a tension between public and private selves (Figure 1). Because she was a comedic actress, her characters were often flirtatious. She looks provocatively over her shoulder at the audience. Soft, flowing drapery reveals a bare shoulder suggesting the ease with which her costume can be removed. The mask in her hand and the discarded mask on the ground represent a variety of different feminine personas, some upright and some not. 24

For both the actress and the female audience member, the theatre was a place of escape, where they could momentarily disengage from the constraints of domestic life. Audiences encouraged tragediennes like Siddons to show extreme emotion. In turn, the safe confines of the theatre permitted female attendees to share these emotions. According to theatre scholar Michael R. Booth, “…at home she [actress and audience] had little outlet for her emotions; in the theatre they could be fully indulged and grandly elaborated.” 25 For actresses like Siddons and Jordan, who continually maintained perfection in their public off-stage roles, the stage itself offered escape and release. Siddons once wrote in a letter, “It is sometimes a great relief from the struggles I am continually making to wear a face of cheerfulness at home, that I can at least upon the stage give full vent to the heart which … swells with its weight almost to bursting.” 26 Viewed from the perspective of the actress herself, the masks in her portraits symbolize the duality and inherent in the various roles and identities she had to juggle. As Gill Perry terms it, there was a

24 The image becomes more complex when we consider the fact that the Duke of Clarence owned this painting and hung it in his private collection. One of these personas is then explicitly directed toward him.
25 Booth, 64.
“double mediation” in these images. They were staged events, representations in paint on canvas, that purported to represent a likeness or some sort of truth about the sitter. However, the actress as a sitter was herself a staged persona, therefore, the question of identity becomes even more unanswerable.

Theatrical Portraiture Revealed

Having considered the theatrical mask from the viewpoint of the sitter, I would like to proceed with the duality theme by analyzing these images from the perspective of theatre’s sister art – painting. By the second half of the eighteenth century, portraiture had become one of the most lucrative painting genres. According to Marcia Pointon, between 1788 and 1829, portrait paintings comprised about 45 per cent of exhibitions. The genre came under scrutiny, though, when it started to eclipse other types of painting. Critics questioned the portrait’s social and visual truth-value – could it actually convey meaningful moral messages? More pessimistic critics, who were anxious about the rise of portraiture and the loss of history painting, considered the situation a sign of cultural degeneracy. These concerns reflect the same issues surrounding the masquerade debate in which men like John Brown argued the loose morals of the masquerade would feminize and degenerate British society. This connection also reveals how painting became a microcosm of the larger society and a locus for debate. Despite contentions, the portrait remained a dominant icon at Royal Academy exhibitions.

The theatrical portrait that on the surface appears to be merely a popular form of portraiture, actually offers a unique amalgamation of different genres and mediums. Painting

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28 Pointon, “Portrait!” 106.
30 Pointon, “Portrait!” 93.
attempts to address theatre and vice versa. The genre appears at the same time as John Boydell was developing his Shakespeare Gallery, which blended the theatre and painting in an attempt to create a national form of history painting. If we consider theatre and art as different artistic identities akin to the actress’s multiple personas, then the same kind of identity slippage occurs in these paintings. For the sitters, not only were their identities on display but their social standing was also at stake. Actresses would often use their portrait likeness as visual proof that they were on a similar level as the upper echelons of society. Advantageous placements on the gallery walls could even put their image on the same literal level as the aristocracy. The actor or actress portrait provided another avenue to legitimize the profession. For the audience, the theatrical portrait was a way to relive an experience. It was as if viewers were enjoying the play again only through a different medium.

Using the theatrical mask as a prop in these types of portraits was not a new invention. Extending to the tradition of ancient Greek sculpture, theatrical muses were often shown with masks as a form of attribute (Figures 7 and 8). Throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries paintings of the tragic muse, Melpomene, and the comic muse, Thalia, appear with regularity. However, the muses are always meant to be anonymous, symbolic, or even emblematic figures, not particular individuals. Giovanni Baglione’s *Thalia, Muse of Comedy* from 1620 depicts a rather androgynous figure in classical drapery pointing towards a theatrical mask (Figure 9). The ambiguous black backdrop immediately behind the figure and the superficial neo-classical architecture in the distant background place the figure somewhere between the theatre and reality, and between the present and the ancient past. The viewer is not meant to place this figure in any kind of spatial or temporal present. Figure and mask are merely

31 See Gill Perry, “Ambiguity and Desire: Metaphors of Sexuality in Late Eighteenth-century Representations of the Actress,” in *Notorious Muse.*
symbols of comedic theatre. French artist Nicolas-René Jollain provides an example of the tragic muse, Melpomene (Figure 10). A cherubic, Rococo female reclines on a semi-solid cloud formation. Her pale skin and neutral-colored billowing drapery contrast with the dark mask of tragedy she holds in her hand. Her languid pose, downcast eyes, and almost lifeless left arm combine to create a complete imagining of tragedy. Both the figure and the mask are unquestionably objects. In contrast, Jean-Marc Nattier’s Thalia is more lively and filled with narrative (Figure 11). She coyly peaks out from under a theatrical curtain, simultaneously revealing herself and her body. She appears to billow away from the theatrical tableau in the background as though she has just performed her inspirational muse duty and is now exiting the scene. Her body oscillates between definite and indefinite. One sees a clearly defined bared breast against an ambiguous mass of drapery that conceals her lower body. She is without a doubt an anonymous emblem.

The muse paintings by Baglione, Jollain, and Nattier all participate in the same artistic tradition of personifying allegorical muses as flirtatious, half-nude female figures. These women were pure creations of the male artist’s imagination. However, during this same period we start to see a very different type of muse or actress portrait. A painting, possibly by George Knapton, shows a female in contemporary dress holding a masquerade mask rather than a theatrical mask (Figure 12). At first glance, the dress and mask would seem to imply a woman who enjoys attending the masquerade and nothing else. However, the painting is titled Lavinia Fenton, a well-known actress in the early 1700s, who was famed for her lively character and beauty, and also became the subject of gossip because of her many male suitors. Here, we see a prime example of artists struggling with how to represent females in portraiture. According to Gill Perry, not only was the entire genre of portraiture problematic, but the female portrait in
particular raised concerns, since ‘femininity’ was a completely ambiguous category. In an attempt to solve the problem, artists often depicted female sitters as personifications, a practice that Perry argues deepened the cultural connection between women, the masquerade, and feigned identities. In her portrait, Fenton looks directly at the viewer and points to the masquerade mask as if the artist were trying to tell the viewer that this woman can easily change her identity and even enjoys doing so. At this point we see the beginning of the transformation in theatrical portraiture whereby it becomes an actual category with recognizable sitters rather than anonymous emblematic muses.

**Painting the Actress: Artistic and Aesthetic Anxieties**

The question of how to depict an actress in a painting – as masquerade attendee, as classical muse, as object, as a woman capable of artistic invention – was not only an issue of feminine subjectivity, but a question of medium and genre. From 1769 to 1790, Sir Joshua Reynolds addressed these general concerns in his annual lectures to the Royal Academy. According to Reynolds, art was to be categorized along hierarchies. Art whose subject matter was historical, mythological, or religious was considered high in form, while portraiture, genre, landscape, and still life registered lower. Similarly, Reynolds distinguished between two major self-defined “styles” throughout the *Discourses*: the grand style and the ornamental, whereby the grand style or grand manner, exemplified most often by Raphael, displayed the artist’s ability to idealize a subject, thus raising the viewer’s mind to noble thoughts. On the other hand, the ornamental style, of which Reynolds accused the Venetian, Flemish, and Dutch schools of

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employing, paid too close attention to the defects of the natural world that did not elevate the audience.

The same problem always arises when one begins analyzing Reynolds’s *Discourses*: he did not practice what he preached. He was and still is most famous as a prolific portrait painter, a genre that he openly characterized as less stimulating. These hierarchies and categorizations were very important to Reynolds, for he considered the prosperity of the nation to be at stake in artistic production. Through the Royal Academy exhibition, Reynolds believed that paintings would introduce visitors to grand statements thus stimulating rational thinking and analysis, in turn increasing the morals and virtues of every British citizen to the ends of a greater nation. So how does one explain Reynolds’s choice not only to paint portraits, but to paint portraits of actresses, a figure we know to have been morally and socially ambiguous? By the 1760s Reynolds turned to theatrical subjects with *Garrick Between Tragedy and Comedy* (1762) and *Mrs. Abington as the Comic Muse* (c. 1768) (Figures 13 and 14). Heather McPherson argues that Reynolds’s theatrical portraits allowed him to explore a middle ground between portraiture and subject painting, and between “the fictive and the iconic.”

Because he was invoking a sister art, the theatre, and used well-known actresses, this new style of portraiture provided an opportunity to elevate the genre by alluding to performance, expression, and emotion. Upon seeing a familiar actress or perhaps even a familiar scene, viewers would recall an experience at the theatre, ideally one that, in conjunction with the painting in front of them, would elevate their thoughts. Reynolds could invoke one medium through another as a way to amplify viewer engagement.

In theory, capturing this cross-genre hybrid is straightforward. However, in practice, one finds places of tension where the two genres and the figure of the actress clash. I believe this is

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one reason the theatrical mask appears more often in the later eighteenth-century paintings. The object ultimately represents the conflicts that occur when trying to show two mediums while still striving for lofty idealism. It is a paradoxical object that purports to conceal flaws, but its presence actually calls attention to those faults. Furthermore, the mask subtly underscores the falsity of the portrait genre as a whole, a lifelong contention for Reynolds. He struggled to find a balance between his principles of generalization and the depiction of extremely recognizable actresses. According to his artistic theories, good artists generalized the details of their pictures. Untouched nature represented the particular, which Reynolds characterized as deformed. His 1759 essay in *The Idler* argued that “by regarding minute particularities [the painter] deviate[s] from the universal rule, and pollute[s] his canvas with deformity.”\(^{35}\) It was the artist’s job to improve nature’s malformations through generalization. According to Ronald Paulson, the actress portrait offered a way to settle the issue of general versus particular because the actress was both a particular individual and a general amalgamation of many roles.\(^{36}\) As tempting as this solution sounds, there is often an oscillation between the general and the particular in the paintings.

Reynolds attempts to combine the two sister arts and to balance the general and the particular in a single canvas with his portrait of the famed Fanny Abington as the comic muse (Figure 14). In adherence to his own principles, Reynolds represents her in a classicizing pose. A common trend in portraits of aristocratic women was to depict them as classical personifications. Although this picture appears to follow this convention, Abington does not quite belong to the


same category. Her posture is slightly too relaxed and borders on the flirtatious. Viewers would have recognized her as an actress and not an aristocratic woman playing dress up. Her crossed legs create an almost pantaloon-like drapery in the fabric, reminiscent of the breeches comedic actresses would wear in their cross-dressing roles. She leans languidly against a pedestal lusciously draped with a seductive red curtain that recalls theatre drapery. Her tilted head, frontal positioning, and direct gaze combine to invite the (presumably male) viewer to look at her. A mask that dangles upside down from her right hand is more visually synonymous with masquerade masks than with the theatrical symbol. It has very defined facial features and a painted beauty mark. On the base of the pedestal next to Abington, we see another mask carved in relief with closed eyes rather than lidless holes. In addition, the figure standing atop the statue, most likely a personification of theatre, holds one mask in her right hand visible at the top of the picture, and she also holds one more mask upside down with her left hand. In total there are four masks in this image, five faces if we include Mrs. Abington herself. Reynolds could have easily economized by depicting Abington with one mask. Viewers would still have understood her to be the comic muse. But he insists on including four masks.

This attention to the mask and the repetition of its form signal a kind of obsessive-compulsive anxiety. In my opinion, two primary objects of artistic anxiety were the actress as an ambiguous, unstable, and potentially dangerous female and aesthetic issues, such as finding the balance between general and particular. In Discourse IV, Reynolds writes, “Even in portraits, the grace, and, we may add, the likeness, consists more in taking the general air, than in observing the exact similitude of every feature.”37 These artists were painting faces well known to wide audiences. These were not aristocratic ladies whom only a certain segment of the population would know. The theatre drew crowds from almost every social stratus, and many of these

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groups would have attended Royal Academy exhibitions. Therefore, artists had to be very careful with their “likenesses.” For it to be high art, the artist needed to generalize the features, but for audiences who wished to recognize the actress they knew from stage, the artist had to include a minimum of distinguishing features. At one point in Discourse IV, Reynolds even admits that portrait painters are often required to include more particularity because of their subject matter: “… as the natural dignity of the subject is less, the more all the little ornamental helps are necessary to its embellishment.”

It is my contention that the masks, especially the multiples, signify generality to counteract the particularity necessarily rendered in the face of a famous actress. One could even go so far as to suggest that there is a relationship between the amount of anxiety an artist felt about having to sacrifice generality for the sake of a portrait likeness and the use of the theatrical mask. The greater the anxiety or insecurity, the more prominent the mask.

The same genre distinctions that Reynolds touted in his Discourses also existed in theatre, whereby tragedy was esteemed over comedy. According to Shearer West, because tragedy was comprised of “noble characters,” like kings and queens, and comedy more of the masses and general common ranks, the generic differences were also a form of class difference. Reynolds recognized this similarity, when he noticed that in most other arts there were two classes, in his words, “each of them acting under the influence of two different principles, in which the one follows nature, the other varies it, and sometimes departs from it.”

The class that blindly followed nature would be the more simplistic one tending toward deformity, while the one that varied it would be more like the painter who could generalize and improve upon nature. His 1762 painting, Garrick Between Comedy and Tragedy, explicitly visualizes the divide between

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38 Reynolds, *Discourses*, 70.
40 Reynolds, *Discourses*, 238.
genres (Figure 13). Mask in hand, flirtatious Comedy pulls Garrick in one direction, while a stoic and high-minded Tragedy gives him an admonishing look. In his painting of the comedic actress Mrs. Abington, the profusion of masks may be an attempt at improving upon the more simple and vulgar class of theatre genres. Because Reynolds understood that both theatrical comedy and portrait painting were the lower forms of their respective arts, the proliferation of masks in this portrait reveals a higher degree of inner turmoil. Furthermore, in his thirteenth discourse Reynolds plainly states that he felt the arts should not be mixed: “…it may be considered as a general rule, that no Art can be engrailed with success on another art… These deviations, more especially, will not bear transplantation to another soil.” He clearly believes there should be a division between the arts, yet he insists on painting portraits of actresses, thereby mixing the arts and potentially polluting both.

Reynolds tries to overcome these medium and generic distinctions by controlling the composition and striking a balance between general and particular. His most successful attempt at this composite form of portraiture and one of his most famous paintings is Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse from 1784 (Figure 15). McPherson rightly notes this painting “as a preeminent example of Reynolds’s grand manner, in which the particular and the ideal, the historical and the allegorical are seamlessly fused.” By this time, Siddons was the unrivaled queen of tragedy on the London stage. Reynolds set a great task for himself, for Siddons was also acclaimed as a theatrical genius. He had somehow to do justice to two forces of artistic intent – his own and

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42 Reynolds, *Discourses*, 240.
44 McPherson, 405.
Siddons’s— all the while striving to foreground the picture’s visual merits rather than invoking the theatre art too heavily. Reynolds’s primary strategy for elevating his subject was his choice of sitter. By now Siddons had the reputation of being a model tragedienne and a moral exemplar. Instead of showing Siddons in contemporary dress, as others like Thomas Gainsborough did, Reynolds portrays her in heavy classicizing drapery with theatrical braids, as though she is somewhere between stage character and regular woman, or even between mythological figure and allegory (Figure 16). Reynolds is able to depict her in both roles referenced in his title; she surpasses the ‘as’ and simultaneously embodies Sarah Siddons and Melpomene. Martin Postle describes this painting as the first of Reynolds’s portraits to be characterized as a history painting.\textsuperscript{45} The painting was such a success that it took on a life of its own: at one point Siddons reenacted the scene as a \textit{tableau vivant} on stage, striking the same pose.\textsuperscript{46}

Reynolds relies upon Siddons’ clothing, posture, attendant figures, and shadowy atmosphere to generalize the picture. The accompanying figures represent Pity on the left and Terror on the right. Along with the dagger and cup they each hold, they depict the Aristotelian attributes that accompany Melpomene. However, they are typically represented only symbolically, usually through just the dagger and the cup as we see in Beechey’s portrait of Siddons, which was considered a response to this painting. Reynolds chose to depict these symbols as strange, ethereal figures in order to elevate the image beyond the mere allegorical. This Siddons makes Beechey’s look like an aristocratic woman playing masquerade, as though she stepped out into the garden and grabbed her cup and dagger to pose for her portrait. Reynolds was able to exhibit a portrait that surpassed the deficiencies its genre imposed on it. According to Beechey’s biographer, critics panned his painting of Siddons. Anthony Pasquin, who usually

\textsuperscript{45} Martin Postle, \textit{Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Subject Pictures}, 53.
\textsuperscript{46} McPherson, “Picturing Tragedy,” 408.
endorsed Beechey’s works, particularly condemned the painting: “… the attitude is affectedly
disgusting. It conveys the semblance of a gypsy in sattin [sic], disporting at a masquerade, rather
than the murder-loving Melpomene.” Beechey was not able to depict Siddons as anything other
than a common actress still closely associated to masquerade and, by extension, deception and
prostitution. The turban, in particular, was a popular form of contemporary dress, but it was
associated with masquerade and disguise, not with high art. Beechey tried to follow Reynolds’s
aesthetic guidelines, but they did not end up garnering him any acclaim. He separates the
different artistic mediums within the composition, abiding by Reynolds’s instructions not to mix
genres. He angles Siddons so that she turns her back on the memorial plinth dedicated to
Shakespeare, creating a visual divide between the two mediums. The weeping cupid’s curved
back accentuates the separation. Beechey tried to compete with Reynolds’s one successful inter-
genre and inter-medium painting, but he could not find the right balance. Rather than leaving
with elevated ideas, the viewer is plagued with anxieties about the actress’s identity and her
power of manipulation. Whereas Reynolds’s Siddons becomes the muse gazing upward and
mediating on lofty artistic thoughts that she will then channel through to the male viewer,
Beechey’s Siddons looks over her shoulder with suspicion at the viewer.

According to Robyn Aselson, the actress was a particularly powerful female figure in
London at the end of the eighteenth century because she had the liberty to seek public attention
and shape her own public image. Aselson views the actress portrait as a collaborative process
between artist and actress in which she had an opportunity to fashion her own portrait image.
Aselson’s account of the actress’s power opens the door to a discussion of how the mask
operates as a sign of mediation between two different forms and genders of artistic power – male

48 Gill Perry, Spectacular Flirtations, 79.
female, painter / actress, painting / theatre. Because the actress had such power, the painter’s task of capturing her likeness became more difficult. He had his own ideas and feelings of artistic genius, inventiveness, and creativity that he had to put in the same room, and even on the same canvas, with those of the actress. It was during this period that the actress was increasingly recognized as an artist herself who could create original forms of intellectual work on the stage. Society began to move from its past perception of the actress as a passive figure who just regurgitated someone else’s drama, to the actress as an active creative agent who interpreted her roles in unique and studied ways. This change was a double-edged sword, for it helped move the actress away from her previous association with prostitution, but intellectual and artistic creativity were understood as masculine attributes. Therefore, the male artist was confronted with a gender-crossing figure, potentially threatening to his own masculinity and sense of artistic creativity. He had to find a way to shift the balance of power back to his side, his medium, and his gender. The mask became his tool for subtly trying to regain some sense of dominance, but, as we have seen, the mask ends up visually oscillating between “sides” and between meanings. Nevertheless, it remains a site of contention in these paintings.

Peter de Bolla argues that the male portrait painter had to construct his own identity while painting a female sitter because he was forced to work through his own desires. He struggled to maintain control in the presence of a woman who was ostensibly posing for him. The situation was amplified when the female sitter was an actress, known not only as a social figure related to disguise and promiscuity but as a rising creative intellect in her own right. Angela Rosenthal argues that the male portrait painter maintained control by channeling his desires through the

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The canvas, then, acted as a mask for the artist himself. It concealed parts of his identity and ideally projected a confident exterior.

This struggle for control became more of an explicit artistic metaphor in the eighteenth century when artists, particularly Reynolds, turned to the classic theme of the judgment or choice of Hercules. The original myth describes Hercules’ confrontation with two nymphs in which he has to make the choice between a life of luxury (Pleasure) and a life laboring for humanity (Virtue). According to the legend, he chooses the more arduous but ethical path. The theme subsequently became popular with Renaissance artists. One of the most famous versions that would have been known to Reynolds and any contemporaries who studied in Italy is Annibale Carracci’s *The Choice of Hercules* from c. 1596 (Figure 17). The modestly clothed Virtue points toward a difficult mountainous path filled with switchbacks. Pleasure reveals much more of her body and gestures toward a lush landscape. One should also note the two theatrical masks at the very right of the frame indicating that the theatre and disguise were forms of frivolous pleasure.

Reynolds’s *Garrick Between Comedy and Tragedy* draws directly on this pictorial tradition (Figure 13). Garrick must choose between two genres, one considered more respectable and virtuous, the other denotative of pleasure and ephemerality. Standing in a regal, classicizing pose, Tragedy seizes Garrick’s arm and admonishes him. She is stiff and statuesque in comparison to Comedy, who playfully tugs on Garrick’s clothing and pulls him in the same direction that her body bends. Peeking over Garrick’s shoulder, the mask adds an extra eye to Comedy’s direct gaze creating a more powerful visual encounter. Unlike Hercules, Reynolds shows how easily one can succumb to the temptations of Comedy. Here, Comedy represents not

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53 Rosenthal, 151.
only that genre of theatre, but the comedic actress, and in turn the general figure of the actress. Garrick looks at Tragedy and lifts his hands as if to shrug and say, “What can I do? She has captured me.”

Reynolds’s decision to reverse the generic outcome of Garrick’s Hercules’ choice seems odd. It runs counter to his strict hierarchical categories as well as his primary goal of elevating art toward the general and ideal rather than depicting luxury and ornamental excess. Charlotte Grant argues that Reynolds inverts the landscape in this image, so that the open, noble landscape is associated with Comedy; this compositional alteration reveals an artistic decision based upon aesthetics. Grant offers a confident Reynolds in this painting, who is able to show his power over Pleasure and Comedy by changing the landscape without falling into her trap. However, the half-hidden mask behind Garrick’s shoulder conveys hidden truths, a concealed plan, or some other partial reality. Because it is ambiguous and we do not see Comedy’s hand actually touching the mask itself, one could also read the mask as part of Garrick’s male identity and by extension Reynolds’s identity as male artist.

This identity slippage and confusion between subject and painter also comes through in Reynolds’s much later painting of Siddons as the Tragic Muse (Figure 15). While he appears to be in full control of his famous sitter, the figure of Terror behind Siddons’s right shoulder is purportedly a self-portrait. By placing himself on the canvas, Reynolds reveals his anxiety about his level of control. He cannot simply paint the portrait and let his work stand as evidence of his mastery. He has to paint his face on the physical surface as well. Furthermore, there is a strange power dynamic between Siddons in the guise of a Tragic Muse and Terror as a typically

55 Katy Barrett also argues that this painting demonstrates Reynolds’s self-advertisement of being able to paint in both neo-classical (Tragedy) and rococo (Comedy) styles. She further suggests that the duality represented here is indicative of the duality between imagination and reason Reynolds believed was inherent to man’s nature. See Katy Barrett, “An Argument in Paint.”
56 Grant, 88.
emblematic attribute of the muse. Traditionally the attribute is passive toward its anchor character, but because the two attendant figures are in such heavy shadow and appear on either side of her, one could read these not as Tragedy’s manifested symbols, but as her own emotional muses, thus reversing the power roles. One can never quite fix the relationship here, and Reynolds’s spectral visage only adds to the confusion. Reynolds appears to vie for artistic authority in both these paintings, one exemplified in the partial mask that peeks over Garrick’s shoulder, and one through his self-portrait as a personified attribute, a typically inanimate object. To add one more power relation to his picture of Siddons, Reynolds signed and dated this painting along the hem of her skirt. It is not immediately visible, but it is as though he wanted to have the last word. Yet even here, he cannot quite stake his claim, his signature only establishing ownership over the gown, not her body.

**Controlled / Uncontrolled Passions**

Reynolds’s efforts to codify art mirrored Garrick’s attempts to legitimize the theatre. One of Garrick’s strategies was to create a type of gestural language for the stage, which meant acting was based on bodily and facial expressions associated with what were known as the passions. Audiences learned these particular gestures and poses to the point that they were able to derive intense meaning from an actor’s smallest of movements on stage. Sarah Siddons was famous for her ability to rapidly change her expression and evoke many different passions almost simultaneously, as exemplified in both Gilbert Austin’s 1806 *Chironomia (Seven Attitudes by Mrs Siddons)* and George Romney’s *Sidonian Recollections* (Figures 18 and 19). Romney

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57 Robert Wark notes that Reynolds signed and dated the embroidery of a skirt in only one other painting, but he does not say which. See Wark, *Sir Joshua Reynolds’ Portrait*, 28.
58 Booth, 50.
59 Booth, 51.
painted three different depictions of Siddons’s facial expressions, all of which show her in various states of extreme emotion. If an actress could exhibit a wide range of emotions, passions, or attitudes, she would always be praised more highly in the presses.

Easily enjoyed live at the theatre, capturing an actress’s range of emotions in paint was a difficult task. Particularly with regard to Comedy, Shearer West notes that theatre critics and artists focused on what appeared to be the actress’s limitless number of characters or passions, each of which had its own face or mask. West connects the idea of infinity to Hogarth’s rococo serpentine line, but one can also use this ceaseless identity transformation to complicate the Academic theatrical portrait. For West infinity poses no problem to Hogarth’s aesthetics, but, for artists attempting to follow Reynolds’s principles, infinity did cause problems. In the fourth discourse, Reynolds says: “On the whole … there is but one presiding principle which regulates, and gives stability to every art. The works … which are built upon general nature, live for ever [as opposed to] those which depend on particular customs and habits … or the fluctuation of fashion.” Reynolds emphasizes the benefits of stability over fleeting habits when one is trying to produce art in the grand manner. Each distinguished passion exhibits a form of unwanted particularity. In Discourse five Reynolds states this explicitly: “If you mean to preserve the most perfect beauty in its most perfect state, you cannot express the passions, all of which produce distortion and deformity.” If we read this comment with a view toward one of the actress paintings, it is easy to see how any artist would have trouble finding a balance between generalized perfection and his sitter’s versatility. A compromise between the stability of true

60 West, *Image of the Actor*, 127. West also notes the connection between infinite variety and the growing interest in physiognomy.
61 Reynolds, 73.
62 Reynolds, 78.
beauty and the fluctuating “partial view of nature” was always being negotiated in these paintings.63

The actress was famous for rapidly changing her facial expressions and pose, but painting is a static medium. How were artists to accurately depict the “character” of these sitters without revealing one of the weaknesses of their own artistic medium? They had to find a way to both allude to her ability, but also to control it and show the dominance of their medium and artistic skill. All of the artists downplay the emotional facial expressions that would have been characteristic of the actresses on stage. None of the figures have any expression similar to those in Romney’s Sidonian Recollections. In fact, the figure with the most emotional intensity in Reynolds’ painting of Siddons as the Tragic Muse is his own self-portrait. He competes with the queen of Tragedy for emotional intensity. Emotions were fleeting according to Reynolds; therefore, they were a deformity and stood in contrast to the artistic rendering of a sitter’s stable character. The artist had to relegate that emotion and infinite variety of characters somewhere else in the painting. These “deformities” get transferred to the theatrical mask. All five faces in Reynolds’s Mrs. Abington reflect the comedic actress’s ability to transform from one coquette to another breeches-wearing character. I do not believe it is coincidental that three of the masks are represented in stone, so that they take on a more fixed quality and she no longer has direct access to them. Likewise, in Beechey’s portrait we see another stone mask on the plinth. One should note how often these masks are shown with some degree of lost profile, which could allude to Reynolds’s idea about the “partial view of nature.”

Artists may also have felt the need to “control” these actresses’ emotions in light of Edmund Burke’s aesthetics and the sublime. According to Burke one can be provoked to

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experience the sublime by sudden beginnings or cessations of sounds. The actress’s rapid transformations from one emotion or passion to another offered a form of the sublime for audience members. For artists and connoisseurs familiar with both Burke’s and Reynolds’s writings, the idea of these women being sublime spectacles was a problem, since both theorists categorized the sublime as a “more manly, noble, and dignified manner.” Susan Khin Zaw even notes that Burke considered raw emotional states as not only feminine, but primitive and animalistic. Therefore, artists had to control this unwanted aesthetic gender transgression, so they removed the actress’s ability to evoke the sublime in these portraits. Any feeling of sublimity one experienced in front of the painting would come from the male artist’s talent, not the female actress. Her power to change character, her ephemeral nature, and her capability of acting as a sublime agent were all forces the male artist had to fight in order to convey the transcendence of his medium and his own artistic intellect. Any unwanted features or characteristics of the actress were relegated to the marginal masks in the paintings.

While aesthetic and generic difficulties may have plagued the artist’s intellect, he also faced personal dilemmas as the viewer of an actress painting. He was under her gaze, just like audience members in the theatre were. In a portrait session, she could employ her theatrical abilities to seduce and manipulate the artist’s emotions. For this reason, the male artist had to regain his own sense of self-control. Besides considering the masks as sites of anxiety and tension for the aesthetic conundrums artists faced, the masks also allowed painters to continue a visual tradition of portraying women as allegorical figures, particularly Bacchantes, or followers.

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65 Reynolds, 153.
of Bacchus. This visual reference returned power to the artist as the actress once more became a symbolic muse. In the myths, Bacchantes, sometimes known as maenads or furies, were shifting, unstable figures. They were also the source for the words “manic” and “mania,” terms frequently used to refer to the overly enthusiastic crowds who flocked to see Jordan and Siddons – “Jordan-mania” and “Siddons mania” frequently occurred in the press. In Martin Postle’s insightful analysis of Reynolds’s use of the courtesan in his early portrait paintings, he argues that Reynolds used these semi-allegorical images of women “disguised” as bacchantes to give audiences, and perhaps himself, a classically pure and almost sterile form of feminine sexuality. However, Postle explains that despite the high-minded ideas and explanations Reynolds spouted to the public concerning his choice of sitters, Reynolds was still using these women for his own professional gain. Furthermore, he often kept these paintings for himself, so in a sense he became the owner of these women. However, this artistic ownership can also be viewed as a failed attempt at dominance in which Reynolds actually becomes enslaved to the sitter and the portrait, succumbing to the mania himself.

John Hoppner’s painting of Dorothy Jordan makes the visual connection to Bacchus explicit (Figure 1). He puts Jordan in a very similar stance as the figure of Comedy in Reynolds’s *David Garrick Between Tragedy and Comedy* and as in Reynolds’s *Mrs Hale as ‘Euphrosyne’* (Figures 13 and 20). One foot strides forward, and she extends an arm, coyly looking out at the viewer. An engraving of this painting was made with just the satyr and Jordan, but this time Jordan becomes Euphrosyne herself instead of Thalia the muse (Figure 21). This very clear identity slippage allows the satyr to take on the identity of Comus, who was associated with debauchery. Perry suggests that this transition turns Jordan into the aggressive seductress,

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68 See Martin Postle, “‘Painted Women’: Reynolds and the Cult of the Courtesan,” in *Notorious Muse*. 
whereas in the company of another female companion she appeared to be the victim. Whether she is Thalia or Euphrosyne, Jordan is a mythological allegory in a depiction that maintains an artistic tradition of holding women’s power in check by positioning them as muses to the more talented male artist.

Turning female sitters and actress into allegorical figures in portraits was a way to fix the women as objects of the male gaze. On the stage it was difficult for the audience to objectify the actress because she moved and actively returned the gaze. Despite looking at the viewer in her portraits, the painted image of the actress was static, which allowed a viewer to objectify her. Siddons was so famous during her reign on the London stage that those in fashionable, artistic, and political circles all flocked to see her. Men in particular were a large demographic of her adoring audience. She wrote in her autobiography, “these great men would often visit my dressing-room, after the play, to make their bows and honour me with their great applauses.”

David Garrick’s new style of acting based upon poses only reinforced this objectification, for it too easily turned women into statuesque, fetishizable objects. It would not have been uncommon during this age of connoisseurship for upper-class men to consider the actress as just another form of art to leer at. A commissioned portrait of Sir Francis Dashwood at His Devotions by Hogarth, gives one the sense of how accustomed men were to contemplating their feminine objects (Figure 22). As a member of the Dilettanti Society, Dashwood enjoyed this portrait’s overt inversion of religious devotion. He sits as though in contemplation before a scene of abundant pleasure that includes a miniaturized female nude, a masquerade mask, and

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69 See Perry, “Ambiguity and Desire.”


71 Booth, 35.

72 Quoted in Wark, Sir Joshua Reynolds, 7.

73 See West, Image of the Actor, 106-7.
abundant fruit and wine referring to Carnivale and the rites of Bacchus. It would not have been difficult for the actress to become that miniaturized figure to be ogled.

Siddons was well known for her ability to manipulate the emotions and feelings of her audiences. Her performances affected both men and women, though women were especially susceptible since she frequently acted out the passions of suffering female characters. One theatre commentator wrote that at the sight of Siddons’s performance, “Men wept quietly, but women sobbed aloud, screamed, went into hysterics, and fainted.” In a sense, the manipulative power of the actress was even more dangerous than that of the prostitute because the actress had power over the emotions of both genders, a particularly questionable situation considering women’s predisposition to displays of falsity.

This kind of power in the hands of a woman was a dangerous example for others of the same sex. To combat the potential spread of these examples, commentators and satirists derided these women in the media with rumors of adultery, avarice, and other immoral acts. Jordan was consistently scandalized in the press for her relationship with the duke. And although Siddons attempted to lead a blameless, scandal free private life, there were still journalists who looked for sensational stories they could print about her. The most frequent allegation against Siddons was avarice. James Gillray’s print Sarah Siddons as Melpomene (Figure 23) is a prime example of this negative backlash press. In this image we see an overflowing moneybag revealed underneath her drapery and weighing her down. She strikes a characteristic tragic pose, but she overturns the goblet and drops the dagger in order to reach for another bag of coins suspended from a fork. Circulated among others of the same nature, these satirical prints reveal the degree to which these women and their portraits were problematic to society at large. They pushed the boundaries of gender divisions and feminine propriety through their painted images and through their bodily

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74 Quoted in Booth, 28.
representations on stage. Therefore, an equally visual backlash occurred in the form of satirical print media.

Actors and actresses were instructed to use their body and face in precise ways to show the passions. Within this schema the eyes were thought to be a particularly effective vehicle of emotive meaning. If the eyes had such a great effect on the audience, it is curious to note how the masks both multiply the number of gazes and also negate any form of looking because of their empty, sightless holes. These masks are versatile, multi-valent symbols in the late-eighteenth-century actress portrait. They contain different sets of meaning depending upon the point of view. As a professional performer, the actress had to maintain a high level of perfection in order to remain successful, yet she still had to manage a private identity. Each persona was delicately crafted and fragile. If not properly constructed, cracks would form and the public media would quickly discover them. While the masks demonstrate the actress’s versatility, they also show her duplicitous nature that so many feared. For the artist, these masks act as placeholders for aesthetic anxieties. He could re-establish his place as the dominant artist working in the most ideal medium by relegating any aesthetic tensions to the mask. Furthermore, the mask works to objectify the actress for the male viewer. It visually re-establishes her connection to the masquerade and prostitution, thus turning her into a commodity and also negating any intellectual creativity she might be awarded.

In a discussion of Picasso’s cubist portrait of Kahnweiler, Marcia Pointon considers the mask as both an idea and an object. She argues that masks create a situation of desire, in which participants want to discover what is behind the disguise. Historically, the mask was believed to be in opposition to a true portraiture, which revealed a person’s character. She argues that when the two are brought together, there is a moment of release followed by a feeling of frustration
and impediment.\textsuperscript{75} One believes he/she is seeing behind the mask to the portrait, but the mask’s presence still suggests some kind of concealment. This same paradox is true of eighteenth-century actress portraits. No matter the perspective from which one considers the mask – actress, male artist, audience – the object seems to provide a solution to problems while continually reminding one that the problem exists.

Images


4) *Lady Betty Bustle and her maid Lucy Preparing for the Masquerade at the Pantheon, 1772.*

5) Philip Dawe, *The Macaroni. A Real Character at the Late Masquerade, 1773.*

7) *Melpomene, Muse of Tragedy*, 2\(^{nd}\) century C.E.

8) *The Muse Thalia*, 130 – 150 C.E.


13) Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Garrick between Comedy and Tragedy*, 1762.
14) Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Mrs Abington as the Comic Muse*, 1764 – 68.

18) Gilbert Austin, *Chironomia (Seven Attitudes by Mrs Siddons)*, 1806.

