

# «PUBLIC WOMEN, PRIVATE STAGE?» THE DEBATE ON «SEPARATE SPHERES» IN VICTORIAN WOMEN'S «ACTRESS NOVELS»

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In *Private Women, Public Stage*, Mary Kelley evokes the lives and works of these pioneering American women novelists whom she calls «literary domestics» for «in both their published prose and their previously neglected letters, diaries, and journals these women reported on their own phenomenon and became unwitting witnesses to both the public event and their own private experiences»<sup>1</sup>. Kelley begins her book by quoting a letter to her sister by Caroline Howard (soon to be known as «Caroline Howard Gilman»), which focuses on the figure of a lady singer, Mrs French:

«Her public concerts are marked by this peculiarity that she enters the room with a private party, for she is greatly noticed, and seats herself with the other ladies. When the company has assembled, she is led to the piano by private gentlemen of the first respectability, and after every song, again takes her place among the ladies, one of whom keeps a shawl ready to throw over her »<sup>2</sup>.

Kelley sees this report as «striking» and argues that Gilman «had unknowingly foretold her own future as much as she had told about the lady singer, and had foreshadowed a peculiar phenomenon in nineteenth-century American society»<sup>3</sup>. Later in her introduction, she analyzes the excerpt at length and adds this telling commentary:

«Without realizing it, Caroline Howard had implied as much in her description of the lady singer, who remained in her eyes a private domestic woman. The witness, soon to be a writer, set the scene in the presentist language of a novelist, set the scene and made it appear timeless and unchanging. The lady singer enters

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1. KELLEY, Mary: *Private Women, Public Stage, Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America*, O.U.P., 1984, p. viii.

2. Ibid., p. vii.

3. Ibid., p. viii.

the public room accompanied by a «private party» and sits with «other ladies», is led to the piano by «private gentlemen», and after each performance again «takes her place among the ladies», where she is covered by a «shawl». It is as if, symbolically, the lady singer has never appeared in public and has never been paid for a song that was never sung. But private domestic woman or not, the lady singer did sing her songs in public. And so did the literary domestics, private domestic women themselves<sup>4</sup>.

Even though she deals with American novelists, Kelley raises interesting remarks: first, she underlines the innate relationship which links female writers and female performers; secondly, she shows that «writing» was for a woman a very daring excursion into male territories and that the topic of space is seminal when speaking of women's writing; but she also points out that this metaphorical mapping between private and public is extremely complex. In this article, I want to follow the path opened by Kelley, and explore a little-known sub-gender of women's writing in Victorian England, that of the «actress novel». As «public women» writing about other «public women», how did female novelists cope with the topic of space, especially at a time when the issue of «separate spheres» was debated? At the end of an article dealing with the same body of literature, Sarah Bilston hints that: «theatrical women's novelists symbolically question efforts to limit women's access to the public sphere»<sup>5</sup>. I will try to show here that the topic of space in these novels is marked by an interesting paradox: though they challenge male dominancy in the world of literature, women's writers of actress novels never cease to think that a woman's place should be at home.

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In the late nineteenth century, all across Europe, a brand new genre of fiction began to flourish —the «actress novel». What we call «actress novel» is a novel in which an actress is the main character (and not a simple silhouette in the *dramatis personae*), and where the very profession of the protagonist is essential to the narration. Many «actress novels» thus deal with the making of an actress, or with the turmoil female players experience in their private lives once success has come<sup>6</sup>. The popularity of the actress novel was such that it was dealt with by prestigious writers (for instance, Henry James with *The Tragic Muse*, or George Moore with *A Mummer's Wife*), but also by «minor» novelists such as Francis Gribble, Richard Marsh or Henry Herman<sup>7</sup>. «Actress novels»

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4. Ibid., p. xi.

5. BILSTON, Sarah: «Authentic Performance in Theatrical Women's Fiction », *Women's Writing*, 11-1 (2004), pp. 39-53, p. 51.

6. FRANCOIS-DENEVE: Corinne, «Le 'roman de l'actrice' 1880-1916 (domaines anglo-saxon, germanique et français)», PhD, Université de Paris IV Sorbonne, 2004.

7. GRIBBLE, Francis: *Sunlight and Limelight, a Story of the Stage Life and the Real Life*, London, A.D. Innes, 1898; HERMAN, Henry: *A Leading Lady*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1891; JAMES, Henry (1890): *The Tragic Muse*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1995; MARSH, Richard: *Ada Vernham, Actress*, London, John Long, 1900; MOORE, George (1885): *A Mummer's Wife*, New York, Washington Square Press, 1967.

can assume many forms: ghost stories, romances or conduct books are to be found among the huge corpus held by the British Library or the Bodleian. The literary value may vary, to say the least, but the trend lasted well into the Great War. The enthusiasm generated by the «actress novel» can be explained by the extreme popularity of the actress. «Stars» of their times, actresses were indeed spoken of, written of, and it is no wonder that the novel itself bears testimony of this extraordinary craze. The actresses of the period invaded many male territories: Sarah Bernhardt or Ellen Terry earned more money than their male counterparts; they were able to attract crowds, and travelled the world with a liberty that few women could enjoy.

In Britain, many «actress novels» were written by women, who, strangely enough, often wrote not one, but several «actress novels», like Florence Marryat<sup>8</sup> or Gertrude Warden<sup>9</sup>. Sometimes, the urge to write actress novels seems to run in the blood, as the urge to become an actress, perhaps, for Eva Ross Church, Marryat's daughter, wrote her own actress novel with *An Actress's Love Story*<sup>10</sup>. An archaeologist would even say that the genre originated from women, with Geraldine Jewsbury and her *Half Sisters* in 1848, Frances Eleanor Trollope with *Mabel's Progress* in 1867, or Mary Elizabeth Braddon with *A Strange World* in 1875<sup>11</sup>. To speak only of the Victorian period, the *terminus a quo* of the «actress novel» can be said to be *Miss Bretherton* by Mary Ward<sup>12</sup> (known as «Mrs Humphry Ward» until feminist criticism reallocated to her first name), published in 1884.

That «actress novels» were women's business became a cliché: the fact is acknowledged in an essay written by Horace Wyndham, another serial (male) actress novelist<sup>13</sup>, who, in *The Magnificent Mummer*, spoke of these «theatrical novelists», that is to say «painstaking ladies who have made the stage their particular study»<sup>14</sup>. The sentence is significant: actress novels written by women were considered to be low literature, and spoken of with disdain. As Margaret Higonnet would say, summing up Nina Baym's theories: «indirectly,

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8. MARRYAT, Florence: *My Sister the Actress. A Novel*, London, F. V. White, 1881; *Facing the Footlights*, London, F. V. White, 1883; *Peeress and Player*, London, F. V. White, 1883.

9. WARDEN, Gertrude: *Stage Love and True Love, a Story of the Theatre*, London, W. Stevens, 1900; «The Family Story-teller », *Beauty in Distress, A Story of the Stage*, London, Digby, Long, 1903; *The Moth and the Footlights*, London, Digby, Long, 1906; *An Actress's Husband*, London, C.H. White, 1909; *The Path of Virtue, a Romance of the Musical Comedy Stage, a Novel*, London, F.V. White, 1912.

10. ROSS CHURCH, Eva: *An Actress's Love Story*, London, F.V. White, 1888.

11. JEWSBURY, Geraldine Endor (1848): *The Half Sisters, A Tale*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994 «World's classics ed. »; TROLLOPE, Frances Eleanor (Fanny Terman) (1867): *Mabel's Progress*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1884; BRADDON, Mary Elizabeth: *A Strange World*, London, John Maxwell, 1875.

12. WARD, Mary: *Miss Bretherton*, Leipzig, Tauschnitz, 1892 (1884).

13. WYNDHAM, Horace: *Audrey the Actress*, London, E. Grant Richards, 1906; *The Flare of the Footlights*, London, E. Grant Richards, 1907; *Irene of the Ringlets*, London, John Milne, 1908; *Stage-Struck*, London, John Richmond Ltd., 1914; *Limelight*, London, John Richmond Ltd., 1914.

14. WYNDHAM, Horace: *The Magnificent Mummer. Some Reflections on the XX<sup>e</sup> Century Stage*, London, 1909, p. 113.

then, the class line between «high» and «low» literature came to overlap with a gender line.»<sup>15</sup> Actress novels written by women were often considered as popular literature, only written for stage-struck girls. Highly «public», because they were present in periodicals, or in cheap editions, actress novels were thus confined in the sphere of private reading, and, later on, in a closet seldom opened by «serious» academic criticism. According to the same theory, the very number of actress novels» written by Warden, or Braddon, or Marryat, speak against their authors: women's writers of actress novels were «scribbling» or «sentimentalist» women, naturally producing novels as they were «producing» children. Yet, women who tried their hands at actress fictions were most of the time former actresses, eager to testify in favour of the world they saw by their own eyes, and perhaps to defeat anti-theatrical prejudice – such was at least the case for Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Harriet Jay or Florence Warden who began their careers as female players, and for whom writing books became another means to earn a living. At any rate, a less biased view would be to consider the actress as a symbolical figure for the female writer.

Indeed, one can obviously wonder whether the actress novel is not the perfect space for women novelists to speak their minds, or pass their ideas on women and art. By writing «actress novels», women writers forced the door to a public space, often considered as masculine, that of literature. They also chose to devote a whole book to a female protagonist who, in the past, had to win her place on the stage and defeat male dominancy, but, who, at the end of the day, became one of the most brilliant examples of female achievement in the realm of art. Speaking of German «actress novels» by women, Renate Möhrmann states:

«female writers and stage artists are frequently protagonists in women's novels. The fact that it is the actress who attracted the mounting interest in the first generation of female writers can be accounted for by the exceptional position occupied by women in the theatre».<sup>16</sup>

Critics often tend to emphasize the link between the «performing woman» (the actress as the main protagonist in fiction) and another «performing woman», the woman writer, whose performance is precisely her novel. Kerry Powell chose to exemplify the fact with the topic of the voice: «a life in the theatre offered woman a voice – the ability to speak compellingly while others, including men, sat in enforced silence, waiting in suspense for the next word.»<sup>17</sup> To put it bluntly, the actress was one of the few women to be allowed to speak

15. HIGONNET, Margaret: «Mapping the text. Critical Metaphors», in Margaret Higonnet and Jean Templeton (eds.): *Reconfigured Spheres. Feminist Exploration of Literary Space*, Amherst University of Massachussets Press, 1994, pp. 194-212, p. 200.

16. MÖHRMANN, Renate: «Women's work as portrayed in Women's literature», in Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres et Mary Jo Maynes (eds.): *German Women in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, a Social and Literary History*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986, pp. 61-77, p. 70.

17. POWELL, Kerry: *Women and Victorian Theatre*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 3.

in Victorian society, and it is no wonder that women writers chose her to speak their minds. Yet, as Kerry Powell has contended, women writers experienced the same limitations as the actress herself, who could only speak the words of another person, a man, the writer. He speaks indeed of «*masculinistic rhetoric*» when writing about the actress:

«This male-configured language reconstructed the performing woman as more than an actress – as a renegade female, one fundamentally different from normative wives and mothers, marginally ‘feminine’ if feminine at all, quite possibly inhuman. In thus rhetorically dividing her from other women, their own wives and daughters, Victorian men could permit the actress a limited freedom and a certain power»<sup>18</sup>.

One can understand why Kerry Powell emphasised the question of the voice when speaking of actresses; yet in the case of the actress the question of space and the notions of private and public are also seminal.

Indeed, the concept of space is paramount within the world of the theatre itself. First of all, theatre production is nothing but a way to deal with space. A theatre itself is a building which clearly delineates spaces according to notions of public and private: stage, wings, pit, gallery, dressing rooms... were alternatively thought of as private, or public, in the course of history—which changed the «spatialization» of the actress herself (Gilbert, the «dramatic daddy» of the English Victorian stage, decided that there should be separate dressing rooms for women and men, and that male visitors should no longer to be admitted in the wings). What's more, the English stage is often seen as a world of its own, with boundaries between, for instance, legitimate and illegitimate drama, metropolitan or eccentric scenes, prestigious companies or travelling players.

As far as actresses were concerned, the question is space was vital as women had to battle to conquer the very space of the theatre. Initially banned from the audience, they won the right to go on stage rather late in history. The reason of this delay was precisely the social conception of private versus public space: women were assumed to belong to the private realm, and could not have access to the public sphere. Surprisingly enough, the question of whether it was proper for a man to play a female part was seen as secondary. Anyhow, by treading the boards, actresses challenged this allocation of social roles and gendered spaces. Language helped to set a cliché: an actress exercising her art in public was a «public woman», so, literally, a prostitute. The confusion lasted well into Victorian times, as Tracy Davis showed, all the more so that «Theatreland», the Strand, was also a place known for its erotic possibilities.<sup>19</sup> At any rate, every male spectator became the paying voyeur of the actress's exhibition of herself. And the actress performed in public acts that should have remained in the private sphere (courtship, love, grief...). In other words,

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18. Ibid., p. 3.

19. See DAVIS, Tracy C.: *Actresses as Working Women: their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*, London and New York, Routledge, 1991.

she exhibited what was inner and hidden; and she was paid for it, and lived by it.<sup>20</sup> What is more, the actress seemed to live perpetually in the public eye, and, with the coming of the industrial age, her private life was public, and publicized.

Actress novels indeed raised interesting questions on the meaning of gender while challenging the neat division between private and public spaces and spheres. To start with, an actress is someone who transgresses spaces, be it on the sexual, economical, physical or psychological level. She also bridges gaps<sup>21</sup> – between genders when she cross-dresses or earns money like a man, and between social worlds – when she reconciles the gutter she comes from with the royalty she elbows in her salon or dressing room. By publishing «actress novels», which were often hugely popular, women writers thus added their voices to the debate on boundaries and «separate spheres» – a debate that was certainly close to their hearts. Through the trope of the actress – a «public woman» –, women writers challenged the Victorian ideal of the «cult of domesticity» and of the «angel of the house»<sup>22</sup>. They portray heroines who fight in order to have a space of their own or who try to fit in an alien space. At the same time, their «feminist» discourse is mitigated by the heroine's torn desire between a wish to establish themselves somewhere (in society, in the theatre) and the need to move all the time (to new roles, new social spheres). Finally, the very ending of most «actress novels» speaks volumes: they end with a marriage, with actresses returning home.

## 1. STROLLING/DWELLING

Actress novels can first be seen as a variation on other contemporary texts about actresses (articles in periodicals, excerpts from memoirs). Adopting the guise of fiction, they narrate well-known anecdotes from the (real) life of famous female players. Because they walk in the tracks of their real counterparts, who travelled the world endlessly, our fictional heroines are presented as free beings, endowed with the wonderful gift of mobility. Be she real or fictional, the actress is one of the few women to be allowed to walk freely in public space. The «mobility» of the actress has two «modes»: the most glamorous one, that of the star, who crosses the Atlantic in some gorgeous ship, or travels across the U.S.A., in a cosy Pullman carriage. But there are also a less showy side of travelling for actresses, the drudgery of touring the provinces, for the little-known strolling actress. «Actress novels» speak of these two realities and, strangely enough, the emphasis is rather made on lack of settlement, thus

20. See BLAIR, Juliet: «Private Parts in Public Spaces: the Case of Actresses», in Shirley Ardener (ed.): *Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps. Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women*, volume 5, Oxford and Providence, Berg Publications, 1992, pp. 200-221.

21. GARDNER, Viv: «The Invisible Spectatrice: Gender, Geography and Theatrical Space», in Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner (eds.): *Women, Theatre and Performance. New Histories, New Historiographies*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 2000, pp. 25-45.

22. See DOMOSH, Mona, and Joni SEAGER: *Putting Women in Place. Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World*, New York, The Guilford Press, 2001.



of balance, than on freedom. Actresses are shown as mobile women who desperately yearn for an anchor.

The question of private space is thus particularly important in the case of novels dealing with a strolling actress – a significant part of actress novels of the period. A member of a touring company, indeed, such a character reactivates the true vein of the «thespian novel» and allows lots of picturesque depictions and colourful anecdotes. Now, most of the actress novels dealing with strolling actresses are first-person narratives, putting the stress on the initiation the «novice» has to endure to understand the basics of the thespian profession. Most of the time also, the tale is told from a retrospective point of view: the narrator somewhat regrets the times of her youth, but never her wandering life, which she sees as a burden, and which she left, we are made to infer, for something better, or at least something «settled».

In *An Actress's Pilgrimage*, by Ina Rozant<sup>23</sup>, for example, the narrative begins symbolically at Euston station. The reader knows of the peregrine quality of the book from the cover, which evokes the actress in her travel attire, waiting for her train to come. In the course of the book, the protagonist is always *en route*, and keeps changing trains and lodgings. Her major problem is precisely

to find a place to live in, once in a town, and the task is so difficult that actresses are to collaborate and give each other addresses, as if «public places» (rooms for rent) were not for them. Indeed, the novel shows how actresses are often the butt of prejudice, like in this «cathedral town of the North», in which the lodger does not want to rent to actresses<sup>24</sup>. On the other hand, a strolling player's life is also a struggle to make oneself at home in alien and hostile surroundings. Often deprived of «private space» to change dress, strolling actresses are to improvise a dressing room near the stage, or underneath – a symbolical vision of the actress as the «scum of the earth», perhaps, or of the strolling player as the lowest member of the acting profession. In any case, the strolling actress's life



23. ROZANT, Ina: *An Actress's Pilgrimage*, London, T. Sealey Clark, 1906.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

is sheer un-quietness and publicity: she is not allowed privacy or settlement. Actually, the strolling female player suffers from a major defect, she cannot be assigned to a place. At the bottom of the theatrical ladder, would-be actresses also make extensive use of modern ways of transportation: fictional chorus girls or understudies take the omnibus to commute between their home, most of the time located in the suburbs, and their «workplace», the theatre, often in the centre. In this case, the very mobility of the actress is negatively connoted: extensive travel and wandering through (public) space indicate failure as an actress.

At the top of the ladder, on the contrary, constant touring is a hint of success as an actress, but certainly of failure as a woman. In actress novels, even stars, inveterate travellers by profession, want to settle. *Facing the Footlights*, a novel by Florence Marryat, thus presents the charismatic character of Mrs Gerome, a mature female player who advocates freedom and mobility for women: «and the women who neglect so grand an opportunity of taking their place in the world as free agents – almost as the arbiters of their own destinies – are thrusting to one side of the greatest blessing their humanity affords them»<sup>25</sup>. Yet, in spite of being «such a wanderer on the face of the earth (having fulfilled engagements in America and Australia during the last few years)...» Mrs Gerome longs for «a place of her own, a hearth for her Lares and Penates, and to which she could return when she felt inclined for it»<sup>26</sup>. At the end of the novel, her dream comes true for we learn that Mrs Gerome is the fortunate owner of Mulberry Cottage in Henley<sup>27</sup>.

That our fictional actresses are so desperately eager to own their houses can be explained by two reasons. In Victorian London as well as in our novels, in fact, success for an actress was symbolized by the «house», and its place within London. The actress was defined by her surroundings, and her success was reflected by the location she lived in. In *An Actress's Husband*, Michal ends near Oxford Circus<sup>28</sup>; in *Through the Stage Door* Lottie finally lives on Elm Tree Road, near Saint John's Wood<sup>29</sup>, and in *Facing the Footlights*, Eudora is established between Portman Square and Marble Arch<sup>30</sup>. The phenomenon is even theorized in one of these novels. In *The Actress*, the author Louise Closser Hale writes that the actress should live in Bloomsbury the first year, in the Strand on the second, and at a prestigious address on the third, for example near Buckingham Palace<sup>31</sup>. The social climbing of the actress can thus be horizontally symbolized on a map. Far from being an outcast who lives in the margins of society, the actress perfectly understands the codes of social mapping. Sylvia, the ambitious

25. MARRYAT, Florence: *Facing the...*, op. cit., II, p. 87.

26. Ibid., I, p. 85.

27. Ibid., II, p. 213.

28. WARDEN, Gertrude: *An Actress's...*, op. cit., p. 298.

29. JAY, Harriet: *Through the Stage Door: a Novel*, London, F.V.White, 1883, III, p. 151.

30. MARRYAT, Florence: *Facing the...*, op. cit., II, p. 85.

31. HALE, Louise Closser: *The Actress*, London, Constable, 1909, p. 133.



heroine of *From Stage to Peerage*, for instance, does not want to marry an actor because such a wedding would mean «cheap lodgings»<sup>32</sup>. She works her way from a cheese and bacon shop in Islington<sup>33</sup> to a boarding house in Marylebone Road<sup>34</sup> before crossing the Atlantic to spend two years in America. Sylvia is an interesting case in that she is obsessed by «places» (within the theatre, London, or society): indeed, she claims that she wants «a position»<sup>35</sup>. For Sylvia indeed, going on stage is only a means to climb the social ladder by marrying a rich man. In other words, she becomes an actress to become «visible» and public, only to improve her private condition.

But Sylvia is an exception within our corpus. Rather than ambitious career women, fictional actresses are rather presented as public women in search of a house, of something they could finally own, after years of deprivation (in collective imagery or in their own life). Symbolically enough, in English novels, actresses buy their houses with their own money, and do not rely on wealthy benefactors, as their French counterparts often do... But actresses, always in the public eye, are also in search for a space of privacy. The explanation is this time psychological: English fictional actresses rather look for a «home» than for a «house», that is to say a place endowed with affective rather than economical connotations. Here again, the phenomenon is completely different when we consider French novels. In English Victorian novels by women, the «house of the actress» is seldom a space of representation: strangely enough, it is rather a space meant for the actress, rather than for social meetings. The furniture is often scarce, or odd. Symbolically enough, in *Facing the Footlights* again, Mrs Gerome, the domesticated lady of the stage is no traditional «lady of the house» and has no time to read Victorian periodicals about interior decoration. Indeed, even her «private space» bears traces of her travelling and is crowded with «curious and pretty things»<sup>36</sup> she brought back as souvenirs. Through the topic of private space, the image of the actress as shown in our novels thus challenges common prejudice about female players: rather than being a mere «public» sham, the actress is concerned with her privacy, is turned inwards. That says a lot about her quality as an actress: she is endowed with the gift of introspection, given to authentic artists. She is able to draw from her private emotions to convey feelings in public, to the audience – thus, she «can act».

## 2. TRESPASSING?

Eager to defeat the anti-theatrical prejudice on its own grounds, Victorian women's actress novels also seem to be a step behind when acknowledging the place of the actress within the society. In the second half of the century indeed, female players were no longer considered as pariahs, but were marrying *publicly*

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32. WARDEN, Florence: *From Stage to Peerage, An Autobiography*, London, Digby, Long, 1906, p. 28.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

36. MARRYAT, Florence: *Facing the...*, op. cit., II, p. 94.

members of the aristocracy, and elbowing well-born socialites in «salons». As Gail Marshall puts it, one could witness a «social redemption of the actress»<sup>37</sup>. Now, «actress novels» do not seem to consider that new position of the female player as granted. They rather dwell on problematic transitions between worlds.

The symbol for this problematic integration of the actress in society, as seen in our novels, could be the evocation of the Strand, depicted as a land within London, as a utopia in which the actress can live and thrive. In most of Victorian women's «actress novels» the world, the public space seems to be a «no woman's land». The Strand, on the contrary, is an extraterritorial land obeying its own rules, and having its own language. On her first visit to this strange place, Dorothy Phyllis, in *Beauty in Distress*, is lost: the women seem to wear a different make-up – as savages – and the indigenes speak a curious cant<sup>38</sup>. Within the Strand, the actress is recognizable and thus accepted. It is as though she was never to leave this enclave: when looking for an actress, one has to go in the Strand<sup>39</sup>. Indeed, the English say «go on stage», as if it were some journey to some foreign land. In a broader perspective, the «stage» could be this wonderful country where women would be allowed to work and fulfil their artistic expectations, or, less romantically, where the «female surplus», when it was no longer absorbed by positions of governess outside Britain, could emigrate: as the pragmatic director would say in *Beauty in Distress*: «but woman's place will have to be wherever she can make a living, while England remains overstocked with women, and while English parents are so selfish to borrow a hint from France and save up dots for their daughters»<sup>40</sup>.

The theatre, a highly public space, thus appears to be, to some actresses, born in theatrical families, the reassuring equivalent of home. Isn't the audience is called a «house»? Spectators are for actresses members of the family. In Gertrude Warden's *An Actress's Husband*, Michal, a Jewess, wants to become an actress to fulfil a longing, and, in her words, the notions of private and public spaces are strangely blurred: she wants indeed to «earn a name that would make the world forget her parentage, and love and welcome her as the whole house has welcomed that actress tonight»<sup>41</sup>. Similarly, in Edith S. Drewry's *Only an Actress*, the main protagonist is a woman of the streets, a «little Arab»<sup>42</sup>, a «citizen of the world»<sup>43</sup> who finds love and identity on the stage. *Only an Actress* and *An Actress's Husband* deal with the «exit» of these actresses from the world of the theatre, and with their integration into society –through marriage.

37. MARSHALL, Gail: *Actresses on the Victorian Stage. Feminine Performance and the Galatea Myth*, C. U. P., 1998.

38. WARDEN, Gertrude: *Beauty in Distress, A Story of the Stage*, London, Digby, Long, 1903 p. 74.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

41. WARDEN, Gertrude: *An Actress's...*, op. cit., p. 34.

42. DREWRY, Edith Stewart: *Only an Actress: a Novel*, London, J. & R. Maxwell, 1883, I, 16.

43. *Ibid.*, I, p. 96.

In actress novels, the meeting places are confusing as far as the separation of public and private spaces is concerned. Indeed, actresses are often to be introduced to the reader in public spaces, such as exhibitions in museums. The first «actress novel» of our period, *Miss Bretherton* by Mary Ward, thus begins at the Royal Academy. Isabel, the heroin of the novel, is first seen as an equivalent to the works of art shown in the exhibition, an idea which Henry James will bear in mind when writing *The Tragic Muse*, of whom *Miss Bretherton* is the direct inspiration. In the same vein, in *Beauty in Distress*, Phyllis is first seen in the British Museum, but not during an exhibition: she is sitting among the art students drawing from the masters works<sup>44</sup>. In *Miss Bretherton*, the actress is thus objectified, and she is also reduced to a valuable to be seen and priced<sup>45</sup>. In Ward's book, Isabel is then accompanied by her *duenna*; later in the book, we will see her in a *salon*, and on stage –all public places. But in *Miss Bretherton*, Isabel also meets her lover, Eustace, during this exhibition, which is by the way the «private view». The actress in Ward's fiction is thus domesticated: she is to be seen publicly, but in private only by the happy few. Eustace has to convince himself that the very woman he met in public places can also live in private, for him. Ward's novel is very much concerned by the topic of space and can be said to be a peripatetic book. Isabel's and Eustace's love affair is marked by *parties de campagne* and numerous promenades: the countryside becomes their mutual ground, the one in which, paradoxically, they can have some intimacy.

As far as meeting places are concerned, the restaurant also plays a symbolical role. A public place, the restaurant can be threatening for an actress. She wants to talk business, as men do in their business lunches, but for a manager it is a place when one invites women to court them. The actress tries to keep the restaurant its publicity, while the man could like it to be an intimate place. This is the case for Sylvia, in *From Stage to Peerage*, who wants to convince Mr Effingham to hire Philip, a friend of hers, at the Gaiety Restaurant, and who finds it difficult to focus on the matter<sup>46</sup>. Besides, Philip cannot understand the ploy and accuses Sylvia of flirting with her manager. For him, a public place like the restaurant is another space for the actress to display her charms.

The theatre itself divides itself between private and public spaces, qualities that are not permanent but shifting. The limelight separates the stage from the audience, making of it some kind of an invisible frontier, or a battle line that isolates, and protects the actress; the curtain isolates from some time the public and the private spheres of the theatre. The dressing room can be considered as private, for it is the place where the actress changes clothes, a very intimate act; but most of the time it is an open place, not totally closed to admirers or friends. Whereas the stage is the place on which the actress performs her most public act, she is paradoxically certain not to be bothered on it. In the wings, on the contrary, which we could consider as a retreat from the public eye, the actress

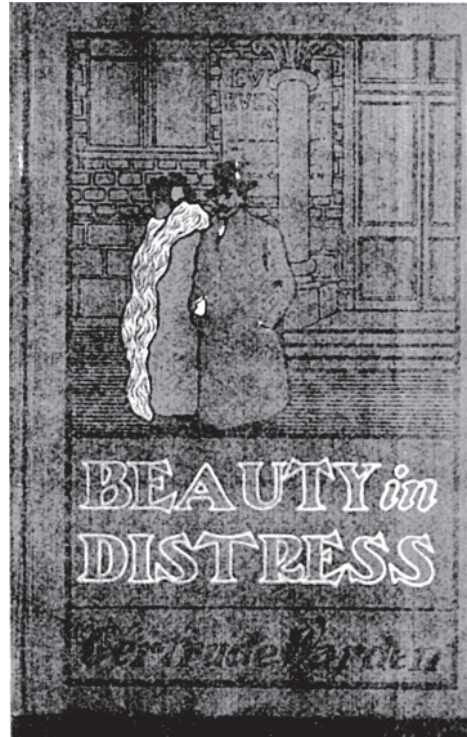
44. WARDEN, Gertrude: *Beauty in Distress...*, op. cit., p. 3.

45. WARD, Mrs Humphry: Op. cit., p. 15.

46. WARDEN, Florence: *From Stage...*, op. cit., p. 80.

keeps being seen. The greenroom is also a meeting place rather than a private place: trying to draw dresses from the show, Phyllis sits in the greenroom of the theatre, where she is harassed by male spectators which forces her to leave the place<sup>47</sup>.

In «actress novels», some places are particularly symbolical in that they seem to be thresholds significant for the question of private and public spaces. The theatre, as we already said, is based on boundaries, bound to be trespassed, or not. Accordingly, the «stage door» is of the utmost importance. It is a frontier to be negotiated, which sometimes connotes danger. In *Beauty in Distress*, Ella, an actress, is afraid of a stubborn suitor who keeps waiting for her at the stage door. Once the stage door is passed, the actress is thrown into the unknown. The outside world seems to be a dangerous world for the actress. The street is not a safe place to be, though the actresses have to walk a lot. In Harriet Jay's *Through the Stage Door*, Lottie and her sister Carrie walk home to save a few pennies. They are followed by a man who tries to molest them in a narrow street. A born singer, Lottie screams at the top of her lungs and the man flees<sup>48</sup>.



The title of the Jay's novel is significant as it indicates erasure of spatial divisions and the notion of «trespassing». The novel indeed raises interesting questions on the meaning of public and private spaces: a child born on the boards, for Lottie the theatre stands for privacy, whereas the outside world is symbolical for dangerous publicity and promiscuity. At first, a man of the old school, who came into the theatre to hide from the rain<sup>49</sup>, the colonel does not want to go past the stage door. He waits for the actress at this place, and escorts the young woman to her omnibus<sup>50</sup>. The difficult relationship between the actress and the colonel is marked by continuous negotiations on private and public spheres. The colonel and the actress are engaged, and the colonel

47. WARDEN, Gertrude: *Beauty in Distress...*, op. cit., p. 15.

48. JAY, Harriet: Op. cit., I, pp. 44-49.

49. Ibid., I, p. 108.

50. Ibid., I, p. 114.

introduces her to his mansion, where she has to play the lady of the house to dinner and tea parties<sup>51</sup>, but he does not reciprocate her efforts by entering her world, the theatre. After some misunderstandings, in two volumes, the colonel regains his position as warden of the stage door. He has to enter the theatre to (re)conquer Lottie, as a suitor who enters the father's house to win the daughter: he asks her to marry him between two waits<sup>52</sup>. Will Lottie leave the stage? One can doubt it, for, as her manager said: she is «not the sort of young lady to retire into private life»<sup>53</sup>. But, Lottie knows what «home» is; it is a place when one feels precisely *at home*, and which has nothing to do with social divisions of space.

### 3. LEAVING THE STAGE/COMING HOME

The entry of actress in society is indeed enacted in significant spatial metaphors in these actress novels, usually eager to draw the line between a real professional actress and those «social beauties» who whimsically decide to go on the stage. In real life, the confusion between private and public space was also fostered by the fashion of «private theatricals» on the one hand and, and on the other hand, by the soirées given by ladies of the high society with recitations by actresses. Actresses and women of the world kept changing roles. In *An Actress's Husband*, Michal's rival is one Mrs Lenore, a woman from the best society who is also a murderess (she thus perfectly casts herself into the mould of the fictional actress of yore, that of the sensation novels). In Marryat's *Facing the Footlights*, Eudora Thane has to battle against the Honourable Sybil Craven, or Lady Mirabel Sefton, who want to go on the stage. A «private actress»<sup>54</sup>, Lady Mirabel tries to become a «regular actress»: it is interesting to notice that the contrary to «private» is here «regular», that is to say the norm, as opposed to the notion of infamy contained in the word «public». The point that many of these actress novels seem to make is that the real angel of the house is the actress, as she is the only one to act the perfect lady. In so doing, writers also acknowledge the fact that society lives on roles.

In Florence Marryat's *My Sister the Actress*, a similar reversal is at stake. Elizabeth Selwyn comes from a wealthy family, but she is expelled from the private circle when her mother decides to leave the house of her unfaithful husband. Mrs Selwyn becomes an outcast as she is deprived of the very attribute of womanhood, a house. She dies in some alien place, by a single aunt. Out of womanly sisterhood, or filial loyalty, Elizabeth takes sides with her mother and is banned from the man's house too. The very first chapters of the novel seem to exemplify the question of private and public space with titles as «where is my mother?», «I will go after her», «you never re enter my house». Marooned in the public sphere, devoid of any privacy (she comes to

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51. Ibid., I, pp. 207, 216.

52. Ibid., III, p. 228.

53. Ibid., II, p. 98.

54. MARRYAT, Florence: *Facing the...*, op. cit., II, p. 61.

live with her aunt, but soon realizes she is a burden) Elizabeth has to make the most of her «public» talents: she is introduced to the reader while receiving a price for a recitation, at school. After some hesitations (private theatricals, then the need to «sell her talents»<sup>55</sup>, Elizabeth conquers the public world before being reinserted in her family, and be reconciled with «privacy». Symbolically enough, the last sentence of the novel fixes her as an «angel of peace».

At any rate, actresses, with their habit of the stage, are perfectly able to «act well their part» in their husbands' mansions: the «*theatrum mundi*» of Shakespearean times is reconciled with the new theories of sociology according to Erving Goffman. Because of her training, the lady of the house knows how to sit and stand on this very public act of private Victorian life – dinner. Most of these novels end with marriage and retirement from the stage, that is to say in the private sphere. Our novels are indeed a running joke on the lady «of the stage» trying to become a lady «off the stage». In Gertrude Warden's *Stage Love and True Love*, the Manichaeism works from the title on. After some wanderings on the boards, Angela is allowed to end with her childhood friend, a responsible doctor, and with *two* houses, one in France and one on the Upper Thames<sup>56</sup>. Angela chooses domesticity without a pang of regret, accepting gratefully her husband's offer of a new stage for her gifts, his drawing room.

A quick glance at the endings of many Victorian women's actress novels would confirm this intuition: the part our fictional actresses yearn for is not Juliet, not Hermione, not Rosalind, but that of the wife, of the angel of the house. One can thus wonder whether these women's actress novels are «feminist». Britain was the land of the suffragettes, of the actress-manageress, of the Actresses Franchise League (an association which campaigned for the woman's suffrage and staged many «New Women' plays»); it was also in London that Elizabeth Robins or Janet Achurch staged Ibsen. Yet in the Victorian and turn of the century actress novels Nora never leaves her «doll's house». What is made public in these novels is rather the reassertion of the place of women within the private sphere. Of course, women writing is not synonymous with feminist writing. Elizabeth Lynn Lynton wrote «the Stage as a Profession for Women», but she was also the author of an anti-feminist actress novel, *Realities, A Tale* (1851) – a book that relates the misfortunes of a would-be actress seduced by her stage manager, and that is supposed to warn women against «masculine» ambitions and longings. Women's theatrical fiction does not differ much from an actress novel written by a man.

In *Back to Lilac Land*, for example, the flavor is deliciously reactionary<sup>57</sup>. Gertrude, the actress, married a playwright. She decided not to leave the stage, an unbearable situation for her poor husband, who is condemned to starve: «Oh, I'm so very sorry, darling. I ought to have been getting dinner ready. I

55. MARRYAT, Florence: *My Sister the...*, op. cit., I, p. 170.

56. WARDEN, Gertrude: *Stage Love and...*, op. cit., p. 203.

57. GULL, C. Ranger (1901): *Back to Lilac Land, A Theatrical Novel*, Greening's Sixpenny Novels, 1909.



must simply rush...»<sup>58</sup>. Later in the book, the narrator states bluntly: «she was dimly aware how she generally put her work before her duties as a wife in her scheme of life»<sup>59</sup>. The actress is so focused on her public self that she prefers to be on stage to being with her husband for Christmas. All alone in the wide world, the poor husband experiences a terrifying vision in a restaurant, that of a «third sex»: «He could not bear these poor little rats of women, with their narrow vibrating brains, their earnestness about Swedish novelists, and their opaque skin»<sup>60</sup>. Fortunately enough, Gertrude is to remain a «real» woman. Her manager suddenly dies and she leaves the stage, to return to Lilac Land, near her husband. The novel ends with Gertrude waiting for him at home, reading by a window, again a real «Angel of the House».

Instead of promoting the expansion of women's territories, British women's actress novels of the 1880s and 1890s thus choose to reassert that the place of women is inside the house. Yet the topic of space as linked to gender, to the notions of private and public, and to the actress, will have an enduring significance.

In a contemporary novel, set in Victorian England, *Tipping the Velvet*, Sarah Waters articulates many of the crucial issues that affected women in search of a space in the public sphere<sup>61</sup>. In *Tipping the Velvet*, the heroine, Nan, walks the streets, becomes a «public woman» by being an actress, then a prostitute, then a *femme entretenue*, before making her nest in other people's places, finding a home, and becoming a platform woman. The wanderings of the heroine are not only metaphorical, as she ends in the streets, almost homeless. «I walked for something like an hour before I rested again; but the course I took was a random one that sometimes doubled back upon itself: my aim was less to run from Kitty than to hide from her, to lose myself in the grey anonymous spaces of the city»<sup>62</sup>, but at the end of the novel, Nan has to work hard to deserve Florence's love, ironically enough by becoming an «angel of the house», a somewhat ironical wink to Victorian fiction: «I felt inspired, now, to tidy this house'. I swept the floor, and then I scrubbed them; then I washed the kitchen tiles, and then the range, and then the kitchen window»<sup>63</sup>. While taking up the props and incidents of the Victorian actress novel, Waters also reverses them to serve her purpose: instead of retiring into classical matrimony and maternity, Nancy retires from stage to achieve a political success and live happily forever after with a woman, and a child. In her novel, thus, Waters goes further than Marryat, Warden and the others, who stopped the narrative when the actress got married, unable to deal with the question of «separate spheres» in the case of the actress, a public married woman. But with Waters's lesbian solution,

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58. Ibid., p. 16.

59. Ibid., p. 19.

60. Ibid., p. 236.

61. WATERS, Sarah: *Tipping the Velvet*, London, Virago Press, 1998.

62. Ibid., p. 181.

63. Ibid., p. 363.

the dilemma our women's writers stumbled over is solved. The separation between private and public spaces, and, correlatively, between man's and woman's places, vanishes thanks to a twist our women writers would have never dreamt of: the obstacle «man» is simply abolished, and the reconciliation between the two spheres can take place in an authentic «no man's land».

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