

Novel,” presented at the “Form and Reform” Conference, University of California, Santa Cruz, July 28, 2017.

6. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 180; *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 228.
7. Leonard T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 35.
8. See Harold Perkin, *Origins of Modern English Society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 244.



Performance

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WHAT is Victorian about our world stage? While the criminalization of poverty, the corruption of bureaucracies, and the upward redistribution of wealth has put many observers in mind of a Dickens novel, we might also consider a less-studied Victorian object: the spectacle. Take 2017. In the same year that 20th Century Fox released *The Greatest Showman*, a movie dramatizing the life of nineteenth-century circus impresario P. T. Barnum, political pundits also scrutinized the stunts of a more contemporary media figure, whose “circus-like ‘style,’” seems part of his “showman’s reality-TV approach to the presidency.”¹ The dramatic genre of the day, according to this critic, is not a Jacobean tragedy or even a *pièce du théâtre de l’absurde*, but a visually excessive, nineteenth-century extravaganza. If there’s something showy about the state of play, in other words, there’s also something Victorian about the methods of performance. So, what can the Victorians—who lived through what Tracy C. Davis and Peter Holland call “the performing century”—tell us about how to bear witness to the Greatest Show on Earth?²

For starters, nineteenth-century performance provides a privileged site for analyzing the power of loosely scripted spectacles. Many theater practitioners in Victorian London were at least as interested in exploring the affordances of new stage technologies as they were in dramatizing a particular literary text.³ A fascination with visually arresting pageantry or exciting musical numbers was even more operative in the minor theaters,

where audiences sought out less text-dependent forms of entertainment in burlesques, melodramas, pantomimes, farces, and freak shows. It is perhaps for this reason that so many drama syllabi skip from Sheridan to Shaw, and so many Victorian literature courses prefer to limit their dramatic texts to later works by Oscar Wilde. As Sharon Marcus notes, “most Victorianists prefer studying durable works by well-known authors to reconstructing the ephemeral work of acting, and have little interest in theater that elevated performers over authors.”⁴

Yet the very qualities that deterred some previous scholars might entice today’s critics to look more closely at Victorian performance—and particularly at Victorian spectatorship. Since spectating in the nineteenth century called on visual and auditory savvy as much as on textual hermeneutics, Victorian audiences model how witnesses make meaning of a performance culture in which words don’t always carry the expected weight. And fortunately for us, these spectators often left behind records of their meaning-making techniques. In addition to the theatrical scrapbooks, cabinet photos, and program collections analyzed by scholars like Marcus,⁵ the nineteenth century also saw a boom in print narratives about performance, which were published in memoirs, diaries, letters, and essays.⁶ While these texts don’t always provide theater historians with conclusive evidence about what happened on Victorian stages, they do offer valuable insight into how audiences interpreted and constructed the significance of those happenings. Understanding how audiences and actors use print accounts of performance to focalize attention, construct characters, and sequence events gives researchers a sense of how performance meanings take discursive shape.

This approach also offers a new way to put work on Victorian performance in conversation with work on the Victorian novel.⁷ How did Victorian audiences make use of the nineteenth-century proliferation of plot structures to craft narratives of theater history?⁸ Do theories of transfictional character help explain how audiences write about “Hamlet” or “Sarah Bernhardt” as figures whose qualities remain recognizable across a series of performances and texts? How do spectators render their point of view in print? Do they tend to adopt the characteristically nineteenth-century perspective of omniscience, or do they turn to more embodied points of view that allow for the representation of limitation or partiality?⁹

By analyzing the techniques that audiences use to narrate spectatorship, Victorianists can learn about the mechanics of turning shows into stories: into the cultural narratives that compete to shape the meaning

of cultural performances. In this letter from Charles Dickens to John Forster, for example, Dickens attempts to influence how his reader will understand the sexual politics of a burlesque performance by the young Marie Wilton:

I really wish you would go, between this and next Thursday, to see the *Maid and the Magpie* burlesque there. There is the strangest thing in it that ever I have seen on the stage—the boy Pippo, by Miss Wilton. While it is astonishingly impudent (must be, or it couldn't be done at all), it is so stupendously like a boy, and unlike a woman, that it is perfectly free from offence. I never have seen such a thing. She does an imitation of the dancing of the Christy Minstrels—wonderfully clever—which, in the audacity of its thorough-going, is surprising. A thing that you *cannot* imagine a woman's doing at all; and yet the manner, the appearance, the levity, impulse, and spirits of it, are so exactly like a boy, that you cannot think of anything like her sex in association with it.¹⁰

In this account, the characteristically strong “I-you” relationship on which epistolary narrative depends also creates the conditions for a reciprocal reception of performance: what “I have seen” or “have never seen” sets the bounds of what “you *cannot* imagine” and “cannot think of.” What Dickens attempts to set outside the boundaries of the thinkable is ostensibly an “offensive” hybridity of sex and gender. But there are further acts of hybridity that the narrative aims to make even less imaginable. Although Wilton's imitation of the dancing of the Christy Minstrels—themselves appropriators of an imagined repertoire of African American performance—is the act Dickens narrates, he has displaced possible transgressions of racial and national identity onto the axes of gender and sex. This displacement is not necessarily evidence of what Dickens does not see, but rather a way that Dickens's narrative makes certain performance meanings more or less visible to his readers.

A robust field of Victorian performance studies may thus be particularly critical for understanding how a political circus shapes and is shaped by shifting categories of gender, race, class, disability, and nationality. The Greatest Show on Earth, after all, made a spectacle out of bodily difference in a way that might feel uncomfortably familiar to those analyzing the performances of masculinity and white identity politics involved in a “showman's reality-TV approach to the presidency.” If witnessing the events of 2017 and 2018 can feel like watching the past repeat itself, where better to look than to performance? As a mode that makes meaning through repetition, performance has much

to tell us about the embodied and ideological roots of our own “twice-behaved behavior.”¹¹

NOTES

1. John Avalon, “Trump’s War On Truth—And How We Can Fight It,” *The Daily Beast*, December 27, 2017, www.thedailybeast.com/the-year-in-freedom-of-the-press
2. Tracy C. Davis and Peter Holland, eds., *The Performing Century: Nineteenth-Century Theatre’s History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
3. Sir Theodore Martin, for example, blamed the painstakingly antiquarian Shakespeare productions of Charles Kean for encouraging a public “appetite for costly scenic effects” (Martin, *Essays on the Drama* [London: Printed for Private Circulation, 1874], 83).
4. Sharon Marcus, “Victorian Theatrics: Response,” *Victorian Studies* 54, no. 3 (Spring 2012): 438–70, 439.
5. Marcus provides both a guide to theatrical scrapbooks and an argument for taking them seriously as an archive in “The Theatrical Scrapbook,” *Theatre Survey* 54, no. 2 (2013): 283–307.
6. See Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 95.
7. Scholars like Joseph Litvak, Emily Allen, and David Kurnick have argued persuasively for the connections between theater and the novel in the nineteenth century. Here, I advocate for a reversal of critical traffic (from “what can theater tell us about the novel?” to “what can narrative tell us about theater writing?”) that would complement these earlier studies. See Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Allen, *Theater Figures: The Production of the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003); and Kurnick, *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).
8. Richard Schoch’s recent monograph, *Writing the History of the British Stage: 1660–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), sets the stage for this question by reading Victorian theater histories (against the grain) as serious historiographical efforts.
9. Lauren Eriks Cline, “‘Mere Lookers-On at Life’: Point of View and Spectator Narrative,” forthcoming in *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*.

10. Quoted in Marie Bancroft, *Gleanings from "On And Off the Stage"* (London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., 1892), 55–56 (emphasis original).
11. Richard Schechner, *Between Theater & Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).



Poetess

TRICIA LOOTENS

WHO made the Victorian Poetess white? No one; not ever. The pre-Victorian historical career of Phillis Wheatley; the fictional life of Germaine de Staël's 1795 Senegalese poet Mirza;¹ the public career of nineteenth-century African-American poet, novelist, and orator Frances E. W. Harper; even the present-day currency of "Black Poetess" as a vital category of African-American poetic performance: as all these testify, the popular life of Victorian feminine poetry moves in part through figures and figurations of the Black Poetess. Indeed, positioned as she has long been at the imaginary "heart" of "separate spheres," the mythic Poetess, including the Black Poetess, now invites rereading both as authorized literary agent and mythic inhabitant of that shockingly resilient, albeit historically implausible, fantasy space, the "private sphere." For Poetess performance remains, as it has always been, explosively unstable, bitterly contested, and expressly political. To confront the inseparability of "Poetess"/ "Black Poetess," then, might serve as a means both to invite and incite new readings of the transatlantic, transnational, and even transimperial ambitions of Victorian literary culture.²

To compose poetry as a Victorian woman was, by definition, to confront the prospect of adopting, accepting, or even being unwillingly assigned the title of "poetess." It was as "Woman," after all, that public Poetess performers stepped forward, thus entering a rich, troubling company poised (and posed) at the boundaries of history and fantasy. Sappho, juxtaposed with mythology's Philomela and Procne, no less than the Pythia; Felicia Dorothea Hemans, paired with Germaine de Staël's Corinne or Maria Jane Jewsbury's Egeria no less than Letitia Elizabeth Landon or Lydia Huntley Sigourney (the "American