

‘SO PURE AND RATIONAL AN ATTACHMENT’: ISABELLA GLYN’S PERFORMANCE OF SOCIAL AND SEXUAL RISK AT SADLER’S WELLS

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Abstract

This paper examines Isabella Glyn’s performance as the Duchess of Malfi at Sadler’s Wells during the 1850 season, investigating the way in which she was seen as performing social and sexual risk whilst presenting a model of respectable female behaviour. John Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi*, adapted by R.H. Horne for a Victorian audience, was presented as part of Samuel Phelps’s project to improve the morals and conduct of the Sadler’s Wells audience via legitimate drama, and the Duchess’s second (potentially compromising) marriage provided a focus for anxieties around female sexual agency and the display of desire.

The stage upon which Glyn performed was widely discussed as having been reclaimed from coarse and prurient melodramas to be used as a tool to reform the pleasures of the working class, and contemporary commentary shows particular concern with the presence of ‘bold women’ in the theatre. Horne himself had collaborated with Dickens on a piece for *Household Words* which stressed these women as the aspect of theatre most in need of reform. Thus the production would have been inevitably haunted by the theatrical ghosts of the “fallen” women who had appeared in the despised melodramas which *The Duchess of Malfi* was intended to supplant, and who had formed part of the public to whom the theatre had played.

Glyn’s performance took place at the intersection of competing discourses around female sexual propriety, social respectability and the effects of legitimate drama, a fact which was recognised by contemporary reviewers. The terms of their commentary frame the production as Glyn performing the Duchess’s appropriate performance of her own feelings in a compromising situation. The praise awarded to her, which seems to locate her artistry in her ability to perform the potentially problematic material in a haunted setting, demonstrates the way in which her labour as an artistic professional became visible in her negotiation of these discourses.

Tracy C. Davis’s landmark study *Actresses as Working Women* (1991) focussed attention on the socially marginal position of female performers in the Victorian theatre industry. As she points out

No matter, how consummate the artist, pre-eminent the favourite, and modest the woman, the actress could not supersede the fact that she lived a public life and consented to be ‘hired’ for amusement by all who could command the price.¹

Davis demonstrates how the social and cultural spaces which actresses had to negotiate in order to work made them vulnerable to being framed as generally

¹ Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses As Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 69. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

“fallen”, or more specifically as sex workers. Paradoxically, ‘to counter-act negative judgements about their public existence, they endeavoured to make the propriety of their private lives visible’, which itself ‘defile[d] the bourgeois separation of public and private spheres’ (p. 69). The potent social and sexual discourses which Davis identifies are well worth tracing in the case of Isabella Glyn’s performance as the Duchess of Malfi at Sadler’s Wells in 1850.

I read this performance as an unusual case which took place at the intersection of discourses around sexual propriety, social respectability and female professionalism. These discourses all played out in public, and all impinged on perceptions of private life. The play, which was itself in the process of being critically rehabilitated, was produced as part of a widely recognised project of “improvement” at the theatre, intended to raise the social and moral tone of the audience. Glyn’s performance is worth investigating because it appears to have established her credentials through its potentially problematic nature, by demonstrating the risks involved when playing a Duchess who married her steward in a potentially coarse old play on the stage of Sadler’s Wells. On one hand her portrayal of the Duchess highlighted the discourses of “proper” female behaviour which could potentially condemn the actress herself. As Mary Jean Corbett has pointed out, female performers in the Victorian theatre were still vulnerable to being identified with the perceived moral failings of the characters they portrayed:

The actress’ performances on either side of the curtain may [...] be understood as mutually determining: if being ‘well-bred’ impedes the representation of passionate abandon, then representing passionate abandon may also imperil one’s reputation for (and experience of oneself as) being ‘well-bred’.²

On the other hand, the performance was intended to help reclaim an audience which included sex workers by the beneficial effects of high culture. Her labour and agency only became visible as the audience (and commentators) recognised her performance of sexual and social risk and the way she managed to avoid transgressing the accepted limits whilst modelling a certain set of behaviours for the audience. Glyn appeared as a “working woman” in this performance in several modes. She was a theatrical professional, pursuing her paid employment and later arguing in public about the terms of her contract. She was a woman in the public sphere of the entertainment industry whose presence was available for hire, portraying another woman (the Duchess of Malfi) who is forced to balance the public and private aspects of her life. She was also part of an artistic project to reform the audience of a particular theatre, performing cultural work on the people who paid to see her. These

² Mary Jean Corbett, ‘Performing Identities: Actresses and Autobiography’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. by Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 109-28 (p. 113).

competing, and sometimes clashing, kinds of work mean that this production provides us with an unusually rich and nuanced vision of a mid-Victorian actress negotiating the paradoxes of her profession.

Born in 1823, Glyn studied acting in Paris and was adopted as a *protégée* by Charles Kemble, first appearing in Manchester. She also performed in York and at the Olympic Theatre in London, before arriving at Sadler's Wells to take lead roles opposite Samuel Phelps in the 1848 season. By the time she created the role of Marina, the Duchess, Glyn was an established part of the Sadler's Wells company, though it was still early in her career and she had not been a leading lady at any other theatre in London. Kathleen McLuskie and Jenny Uglow describe her as 'an actress of great physical presence' and 'a skilful comedienne [...] able to bring variety into the standard tragic roles', though they cite some contemporary opinion which found her performances stylised, mannered and even affected.³ This notion of stylisation seems to reflect a general perception that Glyn's acting style was old-fashioned and "picturesque" rather than belonging to the "intuitive" school represented by Kean. Her performance as Queen Katherine in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* was called 'the most finished and finest piece of classic elocution on the stage'.⁴

The 'Memoir of Miss Glyn' which was attached to the 1851 printing of *The Duchess of Malfi* stresses her connection to the Kembles, an association echoed in a review from the same year, which describes her as 'trained in what may be called the ideal school of acting' and 'the sole representative of that style which is generally associated with the Kemble family'.⁵ The references continue later into the decade, as an advert for the production of *The Duchess of Malfi* at the Great National Standard announces 'Miss Glyn, the acknowledged Siddons of the day' and a reviewer for the *Glasgow Herald* advises readers that '[t]he style of Miss Glyn has been moulded in the Kemble school'.⁶ These sources seem to be corroborated by the actor George Coleman, who disliked Glyn and found her difficult to work with: 'Accurately parroted in the archaistic method of Mrs. Siddons, many of Isabella's performances were intelligent, picturesque and striking [...] a thrilling piece of Siddonian "business"'.⁷ Thus commentators who both approved and disapproved of Glyn place her within a Kemble tradition, giving us solid grounds for adopting this as a frame for understanding her as a performer. It can give us a sense of how her acting might have appeared, and the cultural freight which it would have carried for many spectators.

³ Kathleen McLuskie and Jenny Uglow, *The Duchess of Malfi (Plays in Performance)* (Bristol: The Bristol Press, 1989), p. 29.

⁴ *Era* (24 Oct. 1852), p. 11.

⁵ *Northern Star and National Trades Journal* (15 March 1851), p. 8.

⁶ *Era* (20 April 1856), p. 1; *Glasgow Herald* (9 Oct. 1860), p. 2.

⁷ George Coleman, *Fifty Years of an Actor's Life*, 2 vols. (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1904), II, pp. 570, 573.

Jim Davis gives a sense of what the performances of this Kemble school might have looked like, and how they would have been read by audiences when he describes Sarah Siddons as the last of the practitioners of ‘a long era of neoclassical acting, a carry-over from the previous century’ which emphasised clarity, the recognisable expression of an established set of emotions and well-known ‘passages of high emotion’ within plays.⁸ The audience would recognise the minor ways in which a performer indulged in a ‘careful departure from the practice of previous interpreters’ (p. 230). Davis contrasts this with the arrival of Edmund Kean, whom Michael Booth has described as ‘an actor for romantic poets, romantic critics and a romantic age’, with his ‘physical intensity, his abrupt transitions of mood’ and his ‘violent (though carefully controlled) expressions of emotion’.⁹ Both reviewers and advertisers clearly saw Glyn as part of an older tradition, a neoclassical school of idealistic (as opposed to romantic) acting.

Siddons was also a very powerful cultural figure more generally. Russ McDonald has described her as ‘arguably the first female English theatrical superstar’, the only female performer at the time to have achieved a place in the heroic tradition of English acting which ran from Burbage, through Betterton and Garrick.¹⁰ Whilst discussing William Hazlitt’s writing about Siddons, McDonald suggests that the ‘cast of the prose conveys distinctly the force of Siddons’s effect on her audiences, and by implication the culture at large’ (p. 114). The links made with Siddons in the press coverage connect her with a figure who had significance far beyond the specific acting style she represented. Establishing a lineage from Siddons to Glyn sited the latter both within theatrical history and the cultural iconography of the period as the inheritor of a heavyweight tragic mantle. This association gave gravitas to Glyn, who was still in the relatively early years of her career in 1851, and it is likely to have shaped the understanding of this performance of *The Duchess of Malfi*, too. Her apparently statuesque style, relying on presence and measured elocution, associated her with Sarah Siddons and her neo-Classical brand of tragedy. This dovetailed well with the legitimising and improving model of theatre which Sadler’s Wells offered during the mid-century.

However, *The Duchess of Malfi* was not the most obvious play to find favour with a Victorian audience, at least not on the commercial stage. Written in Webster’s typically dense and allusive verse, the plot centres on the consequences of the young

⁸ Jim Davis, ‘Presence, Personality, Physicality: Actors and their Repertoires 1776-1895’, in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre 1660-1895*, Vol. 2., ed. by Joseph Donohue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 229-72 (pp. 229-30). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

⁹ Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 303.

¹⁰ Russ McDonald, ‘Sarah Siddons’, in *Garrick, Kemble, Siddons, Kean: Great Shakespeareans* Vol. 2., ed. by Peter Holland (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 105-37 (p. 111). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

The passion of the Duchess for Antonio, a subject most difficult to treat, is managed with intimate delicacy; and, in a situation of great peril for the author, she condescends without being degraded, and declares the affection with which her dependant had inspired her without losing anything of dignity and respect.¹⁴

His praise for Webster's care and 'delicacy' blurs from verbal skill into moral propriety as he describes the relationship in terms which sound more like a defence of a friend's *mésalliance* than the plot of a revenge tragedy:

Her attachment is justified by the excellence of its object; and she seems only to exercise the privilege of exalted rank in raising merit from obscurity. We sympathise from the first moment in the loves of the Duchess and Antonio, as we would in a long standing domestic affection, and we mourn the more over the misery that attends them because we feel that happiness was the natural and legitimate fruit of so pure and rational an attachment. It is the wedded friendship of middle life transplanted to cheer the cold and glittering solitude of a court. (p. x)

The pressing into service of the rhetoric of companionate marriage, with its stress upon 'rational [...] attachment' and 'wedded friendship' displays Dyce's concern to justify what might easily appear to be an unsuitable second marriage between social unequals, embarked upon for her own gratification by Ferdinand's 'lusty widow'. Those concerns are further illuminated when we reflect that the Duchess's wedding ceremony is held in secret, and attended by a waiting-woman rather than a clergyman, appealing to common law rather than the church and state authorities. Sos Eltis underlines the fact that to be regarded as a fallen woman in Victorian drama, a character only had to 'indulg[e] in sex outside the legal and moral bounds of marriage', a category which included the 'seduced virgin, adulterous wife or professional prostitute'.¹⁵ When presented on the Victorian stage, the Duchess's marriage would not simply reflect on her wisdom or judgement, but could cast her into a dramatic category which potentially also contained the sex workers on the streets of London (and in the audience of Sadler's Wells).

This intersects with Tracy Davis's evidence that '[f]or the middle classes, an acting career was a version of The Fall from virtue' (p. 72). The character of the

¹⁴ John Webster, *Works of John Webster, Now First Collected With Some Account of the Author and Notes*, ed. by Rev. Alexander Dyce (London: William Pickering, 1830), pp. ix-x. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁵ Sos Eltis, 'The Fallen Woman on Stage: Maidens, Magdalens and the Emancipated Female', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. by Kerry Powell, pp. 222-36 (p. 223).

Duchess was dangerously close to the kind of socially and sexually compromised figure which Victorian commentators so often associated with the actress. I read the eighteenth-century instantiations of *The Duchess of Malfi* via Jean Marsden's insights, elaborated in her study *Fatal Desire* (2006), into the ways she-tragedy betrayed its heroines into more and more inadvertent and blameless transgressions of expected sexual conduct. As the second generation of she-tragedy developed, and the Society of Reformation of Manners made itself felt during Anne's reign, she notes that the 'manner in which heroines step over this line becomes increasingly vexed in the eighteenth century' and the works exhibit a concern with sexual agency and how far each heroine is culpable for perceived stains on her honour.¹⁶ This involvement of tragic plotting with shifting gender ideology contributed to the 1708 printing and the 1730 adaptation I mentioned above, and is worth bearing in mind when we consider how R.H. Horne's adaptation of *The Duchess of Malfi* provided a vehicle for Glyn to engage with the boundaries of female sexual agency and propriety.

The literary critics I have cited from the early nineteenth century provide useful evidence for us as to what aspects of the play merited most attention (whether they were deploring or defending it), but they also provided a frame through which contemporaries read the play when it made its way back onto the stage. Lines from Hazlitt and Lamb turn up in reviews, sometimes specifically credited and sometimes as part of the common currency of theatre discussions. Before discussing Glyn's performance, *Lloyd's London Newspaper* quoted more than a hundred and fifty words of Hazlitt's *Lectures* and noted that the adaptor, Horne, 'has given every consideration to the foregoing just remarks', declaring that 'he has stripped the play of much of its horror, purged it of its grossness'.¹⁷

Horne's writing at this time can be read as part of the broad concern with reform which criss-crossed cultural and political institutions of the mid-century. The year after his adaptation of *The Duchess of Malfi* reached the stage of Sadler's Wells he published a novel entitled *The Dreamer and the Worker: A Story of the Present Time*, which had been serialized through 1847 in *Jerrold's Shilling Magazine*. The preface to this work placed it alongside Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), as well as works by Henry Mayhew and Lamartine as concerned with 'the same tendency – the bodily and mental condition, the social and political position and progress of the working classes'.¹⁸ Revealingly, however, he also distinguishes it from these other works by his particular ideology:

¹⁶ Jean I. Marsden, *Fatal Desire: Women, Sexuality and the English Stage, 1660-1720* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 134.

¹⁷ *Lloyd's London Newspaper* (24 Nov. 1850), p. 10.

¹⁸ Richard (Henry) Hengist Horne, Preface to *The Dreamer and the Worker: A Story of the Present Time* (London: Henry Colborn, 1851), pp. iii-viii (p. iii). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

But there is one important feature in which *The Dreamer and the Worker* differs from the rest of its family. It never fails, on all fair opportunities, to claim for the literary man, and public teacher, a due recognition of his order. The working classes are not everything; the thinker must precede the doer – or the latter may waste his strength, and do mischief besides. The working man must be educated; a limited number may educate themselves, but the great mass need every help that the best, *i.e.* the most sympathizing and highly-informed instructors can give them. (p. iv)

Whilst hurrying to “warn off” all mere novel readers’, Horne also tries to discourage anyone from misinterpreting his title as setting up an opposition between the two terms.

Let no-one [...] expect [...] any setting up of our practical friends, the energetic and industrious artizans [*sic*], by knocking down all abstract thinkers; any repetition of the vulgar-minded crusade against the poet or the speculative thinker. (p. v.)

He declares that the distinction in the title could equally well have been made by using ‘the Idealist and the Realist, the Poet and the Mechanic, Theory and Practice, Thought and Action &c.’ (p. v.). His belief that these sets of pairs are equivalent to each other (and that thought is necessarily prior to action) demonstrates Horne’s concern that the working classes should not be the objects, but the subjects, of their own improvement. For Horne, the creative and beneficial potential was not located within disadvantaged groups in Victorian society, but in the culture and ideals to which they could be exposed by their social superiors.

Horne’s involvement draws attention to a larger cultural project which framed the performance: the improving possibilities of legitimate drama in a working class area such as that which surrounded Sadler’s Wells. Legitimate and illegitimate drama had been abolished as legal categories by the Theatres Regulation Act of 1843, and the minor theatres no longer had to smuggle their productions of Shakespeare in under a thin veneer of musical accompaniment to avoid offending against a law which made respectable comedy and tragedy the preserve of a few favoured houses. Nonetheless, the terms retained their force as markers of cultural value, as Jane Moody has explained, with the term legitimate chiming with broader Victorian notions of a national cultural inheritance. Moody describes ‘illegitimate culture’ as ‘an unstable category which crosses the boundaries between institutions and indeed between genres’, covering ‘the controversial production of melodrama and spectacle at the Theatres Royal’ as well as plays at the minor houses, and ‘crucially implicit in [...] polemical descriptions of theatrical culture’.¹⁹ Samuel Phelps had taken over

¹⁹ Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London 1770-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Sadler's Wells in 1844, the year after the Theatres Regulation Act which permitted the production of the legitimate drama, including Shakespeare, by non-patent theatres. Between 1844 and 1862, when he left the theatre Phelps produced 'almost the entire Shakespeare canon, revivals of Jacobean and eighteenth-century plays, and acknowledged literary successes by contemporary nineteenth-century authors'.²⁰

Contemporary commentators frequently praised Phelps for establishing a stronghold of the legitimate drama in such a supposedly unpromising location as Islington, contrasting it with their assumptions that working-class audiences were naturally barbaric, stupid and faintly criminal. Theodor Fontane enthused in the late 1850s that Sadler's Wells was 'the true Shakespearean stage – the place where we find him at his most authentic', despite the theatre being 'at best second rate'. He explained that the 'questionable company' of the 'by no means elegant public of Islington' did not discourage more fashionable patrons.²¹ Michael Williams's *Some London Theatres Past and Present* (1883) includes a 1879 piece which gives another contemporary's opinion of the cultural work effected at Sadler's Wells, in a movement from 'melodrama of the coarsest type' being offered to 'utterly vicious' audiences to 'the Drama' being performed to the adulation of 'the most intellectual pit of any theatre in London', including figures from the fashionable and literary worlds.²² This note is also struck by the actors Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, who record the theatre's previous reputation (before the Phelps management) 'for having the roughest audiences in London and for being the home of the lower forms of dramatic entertainment'.²³

This narrative of legitimation and reformation, though broadly supported by Shirley Allen in 1971 and Michael Booth in 1991, has come under increasing criticism by more recent scholarly work.²⁴ Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow have critiqued the 'mythopoeia' of 'miraculous transformation' in work which sits comfortably alongside Jacky Bratton's broader unravelling of the myth of the mid-century doldrums of Victorian theatre in *New Readings in Theatre History* (2003).²⁵ I

Press, 2000), p. 78.

²⁰ Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing 1840-1880* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001), p. 108.

²¹ Theodor Fontane, *Shakespeare in the London Theatre 1855-58*, trans. by Russell Jackson (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1999), p. 59.

²² Michael Williams, *Some London Theatres Past and Present* (London: Gilbery & Rivington, 1883), p. 17.

²³ Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, *The Theatres of London* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961), p. 247.

²⁴ See Shirley Allen, *Samuel Phelps and Sadler's Wells Theatre* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1971) and Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

²⁵ See Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

am not arguing that the myth of transformation is either accurate or a useful scholarly approach, but it was a powerful context for contemporary reception, and lets us draw connections between the discourses audiences brought to bear on Glyn's performance.

Glyn's appearance as the Duchess took place in 1850, about a third of the way through Phelps's management of Sadler's Wells. Dickens's weekly *Household Words* ran a series of articles on popular entertainment in its first issues during the same year, arguing that it should be elevated rather than abolished, but working from the assumption that working-class audiences needed to be controlled and improved. The description of the Victoria Theatre (which was similar to the pre-Phelps Wells) in *Household Words* was generally indulgent and sympathetic, making its attitude to the behaviour and character of the young women present even more striking:

The place was crammed to excess, in all parts. Among the audience were a large number of boys and youths, and a great many young girls grown into bold women before they had well ceased to be children. These last were the worst features of the whole crowd, and were more prominent there than in any other sort of public assembly that we know of, except at a public execution.²⁶

A few months before Phelps staged *The Duchess of Malfi*, Horne himself collaborated on an article with Dickens in the same journal, declaring that they 'wish[ed] to show what an intelligent and resolute man may do, to establish a good Theatre in most unpromising soil, and to reclaim one of the lowest of all possible audiences'.²⁷ Once again interest in the improving benefits of art blended with a concern for behaviour and (implicitly) sexual morality, as they decried the 'foul language, oaths, catcalls, shrieks, yells, blasphemy, obscenity' (p. 25) which used to be heard within the theatre. Their most stringent condemnation was reserved for this obscene language, and the article calls it 'the most intolerable defilement of the place' which had to be stopped before 'any effectual purification of the audience and establishment of decency' could take place (p. 26). The charged language of 'defilement', 'purification' and 'decency' suggests the undercurrent of anxiety in this piece – an anxiety which lead Dickens elsewhere to label the 'bold women' of the Victoria as 'the worst features of the whole crowd'. A journalistic sketch of 'The Story of Old Sadler's Wells', written in 1879 and included in Williams's *Some London Theatres Past and Present*, similarly associates the pre-Phelps theatre with concern over women in public:

²⁶ [Charles Dickens], 'The Amusements of the People', *Household Words* (13 April 1850), pp. 57-60 (p. 57).

²⁷ [Charles Dickens and Richard H. Horne], 'Shakespeare and Newgate', *Household Words* (4 Oct. 1851), pp. 25-27 (p. 25). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

Their task was, at first, no easy one. Melodrama of the coarsest type had long been the fare offered to a class of frequenters, in themselves so utterly vicious, that no respectable tradesman would dream of taking his wife or daughters to the place. The lessees had not only to purify the nature of the performances, they had also to *unmake*, as well as to create, their audience.²⁸

The qualification of ‘respectable’ in the last quotation presumably implies that there were indeed women and girls present at Sadler’s Wells before Phelps, but that they were potentially ‘bold’ (in Dickens’s term), or at least not effectively performing a ‘respectable’ social role. Thus Glyn’s performance as the Duchess took place as part of a rehabilitating process both for the play and the theatre, in which both were seen as at risk of enabling or containing sexual impropriety. The cultural work carried out by the production was intended to disrupt the sex work which Dickens and Horne believed was taking place in the theatre. The cultural gravitas of Glyn’s association with Siddons was being leveraged to present this production as legitimate and capable of bringing the high culture tradition to bear upon the supposedly degenerate surroundings of the theatre. Horne’s hand in the *Household Words* article positions him in the project of moral and theatrical regeneration as both reformer and reporter. He appears presenting a certain form of entertainment to the audience and then policing their reaction to it in print, just as he attempted to determine and control the reader’s engagement with *The Dreamer and the Worker*.

Having set the production in these contexts, it is striking (if not surprising) how much energy newspaper reviews of Glyn’s performance expend on the love scenes at the beginning of the play, whether using them to commend or criticise it. The *Birmingham Daily Post* had this to say:

Miss Glyn was more thoroughly at home in the earlier sunny phases of the history than from her tragic acquirements and aspirations might have been expected; and in the wooing scene with *Antonio*, in the first act, where womanly diffidence and womanly impulses contend respecting those advances which the superiority of her station impose upon her, she was especially happy. The passages of affection with her husband lover, *Antonio* (Mr McLein), were delightful pieces of dramatic sketching, and the girlish expression of joy which escapes her at the assumed leniency of her stern brother *Ferdinand*, in regard to the current scandals concerning her, was a master-stroke in its way, striking a chord that vibrated in every bosom.²⁹

The *Examiner* was less keen on Glyn’s performance, but nonetheless picked the same aspects of the show upon which to base its judgment:

²⁸ Williams, *Some London Theatres Past and Present*, p. 18.

²⁹ *Birmingham Daily Post* (26 Dec. 1850), p. 3.

The performance of Miss Glyn also has fine points, though a little too gay and conscious in the early scenes, and somewhat failing of the intensity of spirit with which one fancies she should repel the taunts of her murderers – ‘I am Duchess of Malfi still’.³⁰

Despite the difference in opinion, this review clearly regards the performance of appropriate female behaviour in a potentially compromising situation as a crux for deciding whether or not the production has been a success. The stress is laid not only on accuracy or affecting display of emotion, but the suitable *performance* of those emotions in public within acceptable bounds. The elision (or lack of distinction) between who precisely is too ‘conscious’ when displaying her feelings, Glyn or the Duchess, highlights the double performance that is being assessed here. The audience is understood to be watching Glyn’s performance of the Duchess’s appropriate performance of her feelings. *Lloyd’s Weekly* described her as exhibiting ‘a genius equalled by few and surpassed by none’ and assured its readers that she communicated ‘a feeling through-out no less feminine in its traits than vivid in its dramatic force’.³¹ Her suitably womanly demeanour is offered here as a necessary accompaniment to the force of the performance, even a counterbalance to it, to assure us that her demonstration had not carried her beyond necessary limits.

When she played the role later in her career, reviewers tended to address the same aspects of the play, such as the *Glasgow Herald’s* description of being ‘pleasingly beguiled by the matchless touches which Miss Glyn threw into the part’, of the character ‘who first married for reasons of State, and latterly chose one of her Ministers for reasons of her own – the warm heart prompting the willing hand in the last instance’.³² This extraordinary summary of the character, which begins several years before the play’s action and ends with the first act, gives a sense of how much Glyn’s version of the role (the first for over a century) had become interpreted through the delicacy of her second marriage. It would have been even more strongly involved in questions of female conduct and display when first performed at Sadler’s Wells during Phelps’s reformation of the theatre when he was attempting to “purify” the place and establish decency. The *Herald* reviewer’s extraordinary reframing of the narrative also draws attention to the tendency of reviewers to avoid mentioning a scene which might be expected to draw their attention and emotional response: the Duchess’s death. Despite the appreciation of her ‘spirit’ and ‘force’, though some reviewers mention the fact of her death, it is not made a key aspect of her character in the same way the marriage is. Perhaps this can be attributed to the almost inevitable tendency, which Eltis describes, of fallen women to die as a result of their

³⁰ *Examiner* (7 Dec. 1850), p. 5.

³¹ *Lloyd’s Weekly London Newspaper* (24 Nov. 1850), p. 10.

³² *Glasgow Herald* (9 Oct. 1860), p. 2.

transgression (pp. 225-26). Making the Duchess's death too central to their reading of the character, even if it would garner pity, might push her back into the company of the compromised and doomed women who appeared upon the Victorian stage and, according to Dickens and Horne, in the audiences of unreformed theatres.

I think it would be wrong to read these reviews as rebuking Glyn's performance for straying so close to risky territory that it required justification. On the contrary, the respect for her artistry and restraint seems to locate her skill in the ability to act out potentially problematic material, which is recognised as such, whilst not transgressing. The work her acting carried out was visible because it was working against elements which could compromise the performance by association with the kind of sensational, violent and prurient melodrama which had been so strongly linked to Sadler's Wells. This is made explicit in two comments: when noting that she used the character for a benefit performance, the *Northern Star and National Trades Journal* said rather back-handedly that the choice was made 'with reason, for it is by her judicious handling that John Webster's sanguinary old play is rendered tolerable'.³³ At the other end of the decade, the *Glasgow Herald* decided of a later performance that '[w]e may say of Miss Glyn in this character, *opus superabat materiam*. We would have wished to have seen her dramatic power transfused into a more genial channel'.³⁴ It was '*opus*' or work which this review identified as significant in her performance, the visible agency and professionalism of a "working woman" in the theatre.

In fact, Glyn's performance seems to have been more significant for her development as an individual professional than for the Sadler's Wells project of reforming their local audience. Given that her engagement at the theatre was Glyn's first serious public success, her performance as the Duchess garnered an unusual level of public attention. When Horne's adaptation of the play was published the following year, it did not employ him as an authorising figure, but included her picture and the aforementioned 'Memoir of Miss Glyn' in the front matter. The advertising material on the back of the book praised the 'terrible energy' and 'profoundness [...] of pathos' of the play, but also dwelt on the 'tragic power' and 'well-earned fame' of Glyn herself.³⁵ Inside the cover, the reader is presented (after some advertising) with a portrait of Glyn, in the position where one might expect to find the face of the dramatist, presenting her as an authorising figure for this printing. When she quarrelled with the management of Sadler's Wells and departed, she took the part with her in the sense that the Surrey theatre staged *The Duchess of Malfi* with her in the lead, whilst Sadler's Wells did not produce it again for years (despite Phelps having played the male lead.)

Most significantly for our examination of how this performance situated Glyn

³³ *Northern Star and National Trades Journal* (15 March 1851), p. 8.

³⁴ *Glasgow Herald* (9 Oct. 1860), p. 2.

³⁵ John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. by R.H. Horne (London: John Tallis, 1851), p. 66.

as a professional who had to negotiate perceptions of her public and private *personae*, this disagreement took place in public. In fact, Glyn made sure it became public because she wrote a letter to the editor of the *Daily News*, asking:

SIR – As the press is the great court of appeal, sitting constantly for the public in all matters of wrong, may I claim the privilege of your columns to lay before your readers an account of the circumstances under which I quit the boards of Sadler’s Wells Theatre?³⁶

She went on to complain of the ‘meanness’ and ‘petty jealousies’ at the theatre, and the management’s renegeing on what she regarded as an unwritten agreement in her contract. They had engaged her, she claimed ‘to perform all parts and give all such assistance as may be required in all such pieces as may be selected for performances by the aforesaid managers’, but that ‘it is always perfectly understood that such agreements are interpreted with reference to the quality and the station of the actor being engaged’ (she particularly objected to being called on to perform the Queen in Hamlet). Glyn then complains of more unfair dealing in relation to parts:

Having secured my signature to the agreement alluded to, Messrs. Greenwood and Phelps henceforth engage Mrs. Warner, underhand, to open the season in July and thus anticipate my principal parts, exhausting their interest with the audience before I could appear, refusing at the same time to pay my salary for the two weeks, during which that lady was ‘starring’, though I was quite ready to fulfil my engagement, and was entitled to the privilege of opening the season myself.

Given Glyn’s use of *The Duchess of Malfi* for her benefit, it is extremely likely that the ‘principal parts’ which she worried Warner would exhaust included that of the Duchess. The suggestion becomes even more probable when she continues:

In conclusion, I cannot help mentioning that, while Mr. Phelps was, contrary to all rule, engaging Mrs. Warner over my head, and subsequently requiring me to support him in Hamlet, he had been careful to avoid reciprocating the service by withdrawing himself from the part of Ferdinand, in ‘The Duchess of Malfi’, in which I was expected that I should re-appear, without his usual assistance.

This letter positions Glyn as the consummate professional, appealing to her public to appreciate the position which the management have put her in. Her argument is also carried out not via reference to outraged feelings or the abstract wickedness, but by the terms of her contract, the accepted conditions of employment and the

³⁶ *Daily News* (23 Aug. 1851), p. 3. All quotations are from this page.

technicalities of parts being ‘exhausted’. She draws upon her successful negotiation of the public space of the theatre (and the goodwill she believes this has garnered her) in order to stage her dispute with the theatre management. Whilst exposing herself to one form of social risk by conducting her business in public, Glyn manages to recast her role as a professional woman away from the image of a female performer available for hire by anyone with the price of a ticket. She does this by stressing the traditions and conventions of theatrical employment, directing attention away from the immediate financial transaction.

Thus her performance at Sadler’s Wells, taking place at the intersection of discourses around social and sexual respectability, the improving possibilities of legitimate culture and the unmaking of supposedly depraved audiences, emphasised Glyn’s agency within the theatrical system. The modelling of propriety, which required a performance of a social and sexual risk, drew attention to the cultural work which her performance was carrying out, and positioned Glyn as a professional woman who authorised subsequent productions of the play in print and on stage. This case offers an intriguing vision of the cross-currents of female agency and professionalism, intersecting with discourses of sexual propriety and social control.

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