

**“All the men admired her, and many of
the women envied her”: The Role of
Dress in Portraits of Eighteenth-
Century British Courtesans, 1751-1790**

MA II Thesis
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Abstract

For this thesis, I will be looking at fashion in the context of eighteenth-century British courtesans. Courtesans, as prostitutes serving a high-class clientele, played an active role in the social life of England during this era. Many artists painted these women in various states of dress, from the most current of impeccable fashion to marginal states of undress. Despite the popularity of these portraits, and the subsequent prints and engravings made after them, this did not necessarily mean that the courtesan, nor her profession, was generally accepted by society. These women can be understood as being similar to modern celebrities as, just like today, their fashion choices were scrutinized and copied. This issue of dress and morality is one of the aspects that I will investigate. I will also look at the role that dress plays in the formation of the courtesan's image, how she influenced the fashionable decisions of women in her society, and if courtesans were truly considered style icons.

Introduction

Background

Courtesans, high-class prostitutes that serve a selective clientele, played an active role in the social life of eighteenth-century England, as many mingled among not only the rich and powerful, but also artists and intellectuals. They are described most clearly as being “women who moved amongst the social elite but whose sex lives flouted polite codes of behavior.”¹ Their portraits, and the subsequent prints and engravings made after them, were incredibly popular, even though at the same time this did not mean that all accepted the courtesan or her profession. Many sought their images in part because of the courtesan’s exclusive nature, one which meant that she was “attainable to only a privileged minority.”² It was only by such means that “the rest of the male populace” were able to “content themselves with the image replicated in print form.”³ Here we see women that are both wrapped up tightly in and at the same time hanging on the fringes of popularity and society, all the while able to make a visible imprint on those around them. Just like the celebrities of today, their fashion was scrutinized and copied, and this interesting dichotomy of dress and morality deserves another look.

Aims and Questions

Many artists painted these women in various states of dress, from the most current of impeccable fashion, to marginal states of undress, to the most whimsical of fancy dress. I will examine the role that dress plays in the formation of the courtesan’s public image and how it influenced women’s fashion choices. Were these women fashion icons? What impact did the popularity of images of courtesans have on how women dressed? Was fame truly a motivating factor for sartorial emulation? What part did morality play in increasing or decreasing the fame of these women? These women were accepted as being “beauties” of their time, but the relationship between their appearance and their profession was irreconcilable with what proper decorum demanded from women of the time, which I contend, left them with greater liberty, but also greater alienation. Through an investigation of painted portraits and engraved

¹ “Painted Women,” Tate Britain Past Exhibitions – Joshua Reynolds, accessed 11 May 2011, <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/reynolds/roomguide7.shtm>.

² Martin Postle et al. *Joshua Reynolds: The Creation of Celebrity* (London: Tate Publications, 2005), 53.

³ *ibid.* 53.

works from eighteenth-century Britain, I will argue that it is the dress of the courtesan dress that served to not only united them with, but also was a contributing factor to their separation from, society.

One of my chief aims is to explore the factors of representation and social mobility that are a part of the dealings of the *demi-monde* (i.e. those who operate on the fringes of polite society). These women who had their portraits painted gained renown as being great beauties and this albeit factor was integral to their success, both socially and monetarily. Herein lies the interesting issue of women using their beauty as a way to give them access to a life that they might not have otherwise been able to be a part of. It is important to note that it is not solely an issue of simply being regarded as aesthetically pleasing, as there were many pretty prostitutes who did not rise to such great heights of fame that placed them in the demi-sphere where the courtesan resided.

This is particularly remarkable as social mobility then and now (perhaps more then than now) was difficult and not achieved by many. It will be of interest to explore the phenomenon, namely how it related to women who were able to achieve greater independence and control over their lives. This is especially interesting to investigate it in contrast to those who were regarded by those socially above them as being moral, privileged, and enviable (i.e. the aristocratic woman). It is very important to note, however, that no matter to which degree these women moved towards the top of the social ladder, they were never experienced full acceptance; social criticism and “social awkwardness” would never completely cease to hound them.⁴

Materials and Methodology

Artists and Subjects

I will be analyzing images by portraitists who were active in eighteenth-century England, chiefly Joshua Reynolds (1723-92), Thomas Gainsborough (1727-88), Nathaniel Hone (1718-84) and George Willison (1741-97). The majority of the paintings I consult, however, are works by Reynolds simply because is paintings of courtesans are the ones that survive in the greatest quantity. Unfortunately, the number of existing paintings by other artists is minimal, despite there being written accounts of many of these famous women being painted by all the fashionable

⁴ *ibid.* 82. See also *ibid.* 93.

portraitists in town. Time has not been kind to the courtesan's image, as many of their paintings are lost or destroyed. Thankfully, many still exist in engraved form so when the original is not available, I will refer to printed version. Gainsborough's portraits of two notable courtesans, Mrs. Grace Elliott and Nancy Parsons, are discussed at great length in chapter three.

My general bias towards Reynolds exists not only because of the number of extant paintings by his hand, but also due to the way that he integrated compositional elements from his courtesan portraits into his other works. It makes for interesting comparisons that are not so readily apparent in other works by other artists. That being said, this is not an exclusive study on Reynolds's treatment of the image of the courtesan, but rather a study on the image of the courtesan itself.

Reynolds's position as a portraitist of these women is worth noting, however, as he was well acquainted with many of the courtesans in question, especially Kitty Fisher, whom he counted as a friend, included in his social circle, and welcomed into his studio for social visits.⁵ This relationship held additional guarantees, as he was able to use her image to boost his popularity, as well as and hers. The dissemination of her image solidified her position before the eyes of the women of her time, so her fashion sense, which included many rich and elegant parts, was ripe for emulating. I will look at several different forms of dress portrayed in these women's portraits, mainly in contemporary costume and undress (i.e. clothing not worn outside of the house), and not necessarily fancy dress. The courtesans that I wish to consider were at the top of their game and received all the fame and fortune they could have ever imagined: Kitty Fisher, Nelly O'Brien, Nancy Parsons, Grace Elliott, and Mrs. Frances Abington. All of these women were shown dressed in a variety of different ways, and it is these varying representations that I will discuss in relation to the questions that I have previously stated.

Consulted Materials

I have used portraits—painted and engraved— as my main source for analysis over the course of this investigation. Digital images of engravings, as well as the physical objects themselves, were consulted, in addition to painted portraits of these courtesans

⁵ See David Mannings and Martin Postle, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 188; also the Tate Britain "Painted Women" exhibition webpage (see above citation).

both in reproduced and actual form. The printed medium is especially important to this study as they were the most readily accessible images available to the public at large.⁶ I feel that it is important to consider prints as being equal, if not of marginally greater importance, to the reception and utilization of these courtesanal images for a number of reasons that I will discuss at greater length in the following chapters. The satirical side of artistic production is also important to investigate because it not only shows a less serious angle to renderings that are more or less devoted to truthful representation (or the appearance of such), but also how the extreme popularity of these prints also sheds light on how certain portrayals played to both boost and lower the regard of these women. Looking at the way their clothing is rendered is significant to this argument, as in some cases it differs quite drastically to how one might believe that prostitutes, regardless of their rank, would be shown.

The works of anonymous printmakers also graced the pages of newspapers or were available for individual sale included more simplistic representations of courtesans that focused less on specific personal descriptive details and more on the overall general understanding of what a courtesan would look like. In these cases, one relies on the dress of the woman to denote her status, and the text as well to help identify her as a courtesan as the faces were more general depictions rather than actual renderings of a persons particular facial features. In looking at these, one can see how a dress plays an increasingly important role in advancing the narrative without being held down by representative portraiture. The different method used by printmakers shows that a different focus could be used to tell a different type of story with images, namely one that is concerned with political or social points and not the actual persons involved. A brief discussion of this is included in the first chapter in relation to the issues of recognition of the courtesan as either a distinct personality versus a cultural phenomenon.

Looking at actual examples of dress will also serve to establish a context and a level of accuracy needed in order to understand how the artist chose to interpret the particular dresses and I have consulted the archive of the Museum of London to examine which styles were of influence to the artists in question. They have a fairly substantial inventory of eighteenth-century dress and illustrations of contemporary dress from period fashion magazines. Consulting these sources, although they were

⁶ Timothy Clayton, *The English Print, 1688-1802* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), xi-xii.

not the actual pieces of clothing in question, deepened my understanding of the dress of the time. I was able to see how they were constructed, how the different attached accessories interacted with each other, as well as what details were more important to the wearer than others (which conflict with a modern understanding of dress). The plates extracted from fashion magazines showed that even though the clothing depicted is labeled as “Dress of the Year 17--” it differed significantly from what actual dress was like. This also added another level of understanding to the approach that needed to be taken when analyzing and understanding the paintings as representations of dress that could be copied and emulated.

I also briefly consulted novels of the era, as well as portions of biographies of some of the leading courtesans of the early part of the century (1730-50). These include John Cleland’s *Memoirs of Fanny Hill* (1750), *The Genuine History of Mrs. Sarah Prydden, Usually Called, Sally Salisbury and Her Gallants* (1723) by an anonymous author, Henry Fielding’s *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling* (1749), and *Memoirs of the Celebrated Miss Fanny M.* (1758-9). The novels serve to show how authors captured at least one side of the popular opinion towards what it meant to dress above ones station.⁷ I have not referenced these exclusively, but have used them to shape my understanding of what kind of perceptions existed at this time.

Methodology

Over the course of conducting my research, I employed several different methods that aided the understanding of my data as I completed the analyses. I engaged in the interpretation of visual images of different types in terms of fashion as an identifying marker, while situating my arguments in a biographical and social context. As this was a study primary conducted through visual analysis, several aspects of visual culture were evident in the research processes, as an effort was made to convey the power that these images had on shaping society.

I also connected the past to contemporary ideology concerning concepts of fashion’s relation to celebrity culture and fashion consumption through printed images. Issues of gender, through the discussion of the role of women and their social mobility in late-early modern England, anchor my arguments and through the

⁷ See Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1955), book IV, chapter VII.

consultation of sources that recount the lives of my subjects the intricacies of eighteenth-century gender perspectives become clearer.

Previous Research and Theoretical Perspectives

I have consulted books and articles that deal with the subject of courtesans, prostitution, and gender in general in eighteenth-century Britain. In many of these sources it is evident what subjects have already been covered, and also which remain to be written about, as well as what benefit this previous research can add to my own study. For the most part, I relied heavily on materials dealing with eighteenth-century art and fashion as I wished to establish solid historical framework in order to understand as accurately as possible the social milieu within which courtesans operated. I did also consult, however, a some more contemporary texts dealing with some of the other themes that I wished to relate to my arguments. The chapter on stardom and fashion in the book *Fashion as Photograph: Viewing and Reviewing Images of Fashion* (2008) by Bärbel Sill was especially helpful in laying down the basic foundation of the impact that images of stars has on fashion consumption.⁸ I also use some of the ideas expressed in Richard Dyer's book *Stars* as further context and basis for comparison.

In my Magister thesis (*"We Know the Very Minds of People by their Dress": Costume and Identity in the Portraits of Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792)*), questions were answered regarding whether or not Reynolds was able to convey identity more clearly in his portraits by using varying degrees of fancy dress instead of contemporary period costume. I had addressed the issue of theatrical costume as used in the portraits of actresses and courtesans, namely in the case of Kitty Fisher, who was one of the most recognized faces of London's courtesans. Diverging from my previous research, I would like to use Kitty Fisher as a starting point for my current discussion, not only because of her visibility, but also because of her tie to fashion. Almost every scholarly reference made about Ms. Fisher mentions in some capacity her tie to luxurious goods and fashionable apparel. According to art historian and Reynolds expert Martin Postle, the late 1750s saw the advent of a fad dubbed

⁸ Bärbel Sill, "Stardom and Fashion: On Representation of Female Movie Stars and Their Fashion(able) Image in Magazines and Advertising Campaigns," in *Fashion as Photograph: Viewing and Reviewing Images of Fashion*, ed. Eugénie Shinkle (London: I.B. Taurus & Co Ltd., 2008) 127-140.

“Fishermania” where “young women wanted to dress and behave like Fisher.”⁹ Here the impact that Kitty Fisher had on those around her is readily apparent, even though she was a member of what was regarded as “marginal society.”

Gender historian Tony Henderson’s *Disorderly Women in Eighteenth-Century London: Prostitution and Control in the Metropolis, 1730-1830* (1999), however, is a book that looks at the profession on a whole and avoids looking into the particular subset of courtesanal affairs. The study examines, in a more sociological manner, the patterns, sources, and practices of London prostitutes, and documents this in a very methodical manner by use of statistics, which are then displayed in charts and graphs. This information is finally synthesized into digestible information that is combined with first-hand accounts from court records and diaries, making an applicable relationship to the date feasible.

The Satirical Gaze: Prints of Women in Late Eighteenth-Century England by historian Cindy McCreery (2004) devotes a chapter entirely to the subject of courtesans and their image, and how both they and their images were received by the society of the time. McCreery devotes attention not only to print culture and the role it played in forming the social perception of courtesans and their lovers, but she also answers basic questions that some of the other texts have neglected to define, such as, what exactly differentiated a courtesan from a common prostitute during that era, and how common of a sight were they in the social landscape.

The author looks at the cases of specific courtesans in relation to newspaper accounts, poems, and other material devoted to social satire. She also mentions on several occasions the fact that courtesans served as fashionable trendsetters. “As we saw with Kitty Fisher, some respectable aristocratic women had few qualms about dressing in the style as actresses and courtesans, and engravings would have helped these ladies copy courtesan’s dress.”¹⁰ Although this is repeatedly mentioned both here and in other materials, no further explanation is given as to what separated courtesan’s clothing from the other fashions available to women of good taste. This presents a clearer goal for my research, as I will have to investigate deeper what actually was fashionable for both sets. This distinction does not seem to be as evident as maybe it should be.

⁹ Postle et al., 2005, 182.

¹⁰ Cindy McCreery, *The Satirical Gaze: Prints of Women in Late Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 100.

McCreery also wrote a chapter for the book *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England* (1997), which deals with the satirical printed phenomenon of the *tête-à-tête* (see my discussion in chapter three). Her explanation of the significance of this eighteenth-century gossip column, and why it gained the popularity that it did gives understanding to this otherwise strange and slightly inaccessible variant of today's tabloid press. In the same book is a chapter by Kimberly Crouch on the actress as prostitute, and it also helped establish the proper context for not only understanding the origins of the idea that actresses and prostitutes were interchangeable terms, but also how the different social classes interacted with and understood women who gained their livelihood onstage.

The book *Rival Queens* (2010) by Felicity Nussbaum also deals with the issues surrounding the eighteenth-century actress as a style icon, and in particular the chapter on Mrs. Abington served to put her success (despite her origins) in its proper context. The collection of essays entitled *Notorious Muse: The Actress in British Art and Culture, 1776-1812* examines the role of painted portraits in the lives of eighteenth-century actresses. I found Martin Postle's chapter "'Painted Women': Reynolds and the Cult of the Courtesan" to be especially helpful as it explained thoroughly the role and issues surround the actress-cum-courtesan. Gill Perry's chapter "Ambiguity and Desire: Metaphors of Sexuality in Late Eighteenth-Century Representation of the Actress" sheds light on how the personal lives of actresses were kept in the shadows in order to aid their social advancement. Aileen Ribeiro also is the author of a chapter on theatrical dress in portraiture, but I only refer to it briefly, as much of what she discusses does not relate to the topic at hand.

Literary historian Robert Jones's book *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain: The Analysis of Beauty* (1998) is a text that focuses on the notions of beauty and taste, as these were values that were held and applied to not only literature and painting, but also to how individuals in society were seen and understood. Reynolds in his *Discourses* often refers to "taste" and its importance in the painting of portraits, but it is the relation to beauty in which I am most interested. Jones discusses many of the different treatises on beauty, which were published, not limited to William Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty* (1753), as well as many discussions on what beauty meant to those living during that time. Beauty is one of the aspects that is relevant to my discussion as it is a concept that reoccurs in many of the sources I have consulted. Many of these courtesans are regarded as being "beauties" and one

of my hypotheses is that this label of being a “beauty” might contribute to the acceptance of these women as not being wholly discardable, but also as those whose fashion was worthy to be followed. Also, there has been a notion accepted throughout the ages that beauty had a darker side that could be deceitful and used maliciously by “cunning” females who wished to lead others astray. Therefore, reading about the role of beauty and how it was actually understood is vital to the understanding of my topic.

As Reynolds is the artist that has painted the most of the portraits that I will be discussing, I have consulted a fair number of texts related to his artistic output in general, and these writings include significant mentions of portraits of his demi-monde sitters. The first title that I consulted was art historian Nicholas Penny’s 1986 monograph exhibition catalogue that included two portraits of Kitty Fisher (portrait in the windowsill and *Miss Kitty Fisher in the Character of Cleopatra*, both 1759), as well as a few mentions in the essay “An Ambitious Man: The Career and Achievement of Sir Joshua Reynolds.” The catalogue entries provide all of the necessary information about the sitter, the painting itself, as well as how it came to be, which provides many insights. For the purposes of my research, this catalogue is especially helpful as most of the entries include notes on costume by dress historian Aileen Ribeiro. Although there are remarks on the costume of the sitters, this does not necessarily mean that the differentiations in the style that I am trying to establish are highlighted upon; on the contrary, the descriptions only serve, on the surface at least, to show how to a modern gaze, all dress of the period can seem similar and unaffected by social rank and the acceptance by society. As noted in the essay “An Ambitious Man,” it is remarked that “Reynolds’s female sitters, including—indeed, especially—notorious courtesans such as Kitty Fisher or Nelly O’Brien, appear to be women of superior ‘breeding,’ women of sensibility and intelligence” and that the artist had the “capacity [...] to paint his female sitters as ‘ladies,’ whether or not they were [...]”¹¹

Art historian Martin Postle published the catalogue *Joshua Reynolds: The Creation of Celebrity* (2005) in conjunction with the large-scale exhibition staged at Tate Britain celebrating the long-established career of the Britain’s most famous portraitist. The catalogue includes a chapter entitled “Painted Ladies,” which (as the title suggests) explores the relationship the artist had with various women of the demi-

¹¹ Nicholas Penny, ed., *Reynolds* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986), 23.

monde. His observations on Reynolds's relationship with these women, and how the painting of their portraits served to further both his and their careers, are significant and worthy of further investigation. Postle contributed to the publication of fellow Reynolds expert David Mannings's catalogue raisonné, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Complete Catalogue of his Paintings* (2000), of all the works created by Reynolds. Therefore it remains an invaluable source for information regarding all of the pictures of these women.

As I also examine Gainsborough's contributions to the oeuvre of courtesan portraits, I primarily consulted the chapter "A Favorite Among the Demireps" in the 2010 publication *Gainsborough and the Modern Woman*. There, art historian Benedict Leca not only contextualizes Gainsborough's production of images of scandalous women, but he also pits the artist's painterly style and his understanding of women against that of Joshua Reynolds. It's a critical view that champions Gainsborough as a revolutionary feminist, and asserts that all others were content to provide idealized views of women that served to minimize their position within society. I found that the atypical opinion of Leca to be challenging and pushed me to reconsider how I understood the representation of women during this time. Although I do not agree with his assertions about the radical nature of Gainsborough's artistic production, I did find his ideas helpful in establishing a context for how this artist interacted with his female subjects. Shearer West's *Portraiture* (2004) also provides not only an introduction to portraiture in general, but also helps to explain some of the conventional codes present in representation that are not always clear to the modern viewer.

Art historian and portraiture specialist Marcia Pointon has published a piece called "The Lives of Kitty Fisher" (*British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 2004), which illuminates the life of Fisher through literary and visual sources. She mainly investigates how the writings published about Fisher during her lifetime served to shape her public image, and also how it provided an alternative identity contrary of how the public perceived what she was, as opposed to however she could have truly been. Paintings and engravings are used to illustrate this fact, as well, but also elements taken from the decorative arts are used to explain Pointon's conclusions. This is an interesting source as it examines in greater depth the literary side of the formation of Fisher's image. I found her article on miniatures and jewelry

published in *The Art Bulletin* to be especially helpful when trying to understand how miniatures were understood as objects of adornment during this period.

Other sources that are pertinent to this subject are Aileen Ribeiro's books on eighteenth-century dress (*The Art of Dress: Fashion in England and France, 1750-1820*, and *Dress in Eighteenth Century Europe, 1715-1789*), as they remain the definitive sources on what men and women wore during this time. Her book *Dress and Morality* also addresses the obvious connection between dress and the morals of these women. This is essential to my research as it is important to see how all sides dressed, courtesan or not, in order to be able to establish a just comparison. I also consulted an article by historian Caroline Palmer entitled "Brazen Cheek: Face Painters in Late Eighteenth-Century England," which primarily deals with the act of painting the face, both artistically and with cosmetics. She also delves into the moral issues surrounding the use of rouge and powder by women (and men). The introduction to Tamar Garb's *The Painted Face* also explains the connection between artists, portraits, and cosmetics.

In order to understand the role of prints and their role in eighteenth-century English society, I consulted Timothy Clayton's text *The English Print, 1688-1802*, as well as his chapter in *Joshua Reynolds: The Creation of Celebrity* which deals with Reynolds's use of prints to advance recognition of his works. I found Clayton's primary text to be very clear in explaining how modern-day viewers should understand the extreme importance prints held in the lives of Englishmen and women during this era. His book offers an extensive overview of not only the methods of production, but also how people consumed different types of prints, which is integral to my arguments. I also used Bamber Gascoigne's seminal text *How to Identify Prints* for help with understanding the basic terms related to the different types of printed works that were produced during the time period in question.

Another text that I have consulted concerning the lives of courtesans is by turn-of-the-last-century biographer Horace Bleackley, entitled *Ladies Fair and Frail: Sketches of Women of the Demi-Monde in Eighteenth-Century England* (1909). This book is a series of biographies of courtesans active during this period. I was led to this source from the bibliography of several authors of other books that I have consulted, and it appears to be the main source for contemporary writers writing about these women. It is divided into chapters about the most famous of the courtesans of this era, from Nancy Parsons and Grace Elliott to, arguably the most prolific, Kitty Fisher. The

author writes in a way that I imagine was accessible to the turn of the century reader, but today seems border on the side of sensational. The lack of scholarly tone aside, the author does consult a wide array of sources on which he bases his conclusions, and he also includes a substantial bibliography for consultation. It is a good source for getting an overall feel of what being a courtesan involved, along with the petty details of their numerous scandals and troubles. There are several mentions in the chapter on Kitty Fisher that mention her connection to fashion, clothing, and the luxurious image she propagated. These are important details that give a glimpse of why such things were said about her influencing and “leading astray” the ladies of London towards a life of luxury and dissipation. As the book is a strictly biographical source, it lacks any kind of theoretical perspective. Instead, we are treated to all of the details of the rise and unavoidable fall of these fascinating women.

Eighteenth-Century Courtesans

Courtesans in eighteenth-century Britain were different from their “lower sisters” in the profession of prostitution as they were not tied to specific houses or madams, nor were they impoverished and desperate. They were not perceived as being easily accessible, but on the contrary, were recognized for their exclusivity and attachment to the higher rungs of society. Cindy McCreery elucidates with this explanation:

While ‘courtesan’ was theoretically interchangeable with ‘prostitute’ in the late eighteenth century, in practice prints, newspapers, and other commentaries increasingly drew distinctions between expensive, exclusive prostitutes and their cheaper, more numerous counterparts. A courtesan and a streetwalker were viewed as the two extremes on the spectrum of prostitution.¹²

She further solidifies the differences by explaining that, unlike the common streetwalker, courtesans engaged in more lasting relationships that involved “glamorous social appearances, [...] greater control over their career and its public representation” as well as from time to time, a bit of romance.¹³ The press dubbed them as being members of the “Cyprian Corps,” or an elegant sisterhood of “impures,” a label that harkened back to a Greco-Roman past of goddesses and bands

¹² McCreery 2004, 81.

¹³ *ibid.* 82.

of priestesses, which was albeit thinly veiled with slightly soiled implications.¹⁴ In the sexually liberal world of eighteenth-century London, such women were more or less accepted members of society and in turn were as closely followed as politicians. “Not their liaisons merely” were under public scrutiny, “but their dress, the decoration of their coaches, even the flowers adorning the window-boxes of their elegant houses were matters for chronicle.”¹⁵

The reason for their wealth and success, as postulated by I. M. Davis, biographer of the courtesan Mrs. Armistead, was the surfeit of cash in the British Empire during this period, which meant by extension that everything was available for purchase, including fashionable mistresses.¹⁶ Display, and all that it encompassed, was to be as opulent as possible, and therefore no ordinary woman would be acceptable if these particular aims were to be attained. For the woman in such a situation, such an avenue was more than desirable, as independent women had very few means for survival outside of family money, marriage, or in rarer cases, employment. A courtesan’s life could offer much more fiscal comfort, as the expenses of one such woman could top £3,000 per annum, while an average workman would only *earn* around £50 during that same time period.¹⁷ This situation proved to be truly tempting for many, as one would receive all the benefits of marriage—money, security, and companionship—without all the apparent drawbacks of surrendering one’s independence and, in some cases, losing the legal right to property and inheritance.

In many cases, these women only practiced their trade for a short time, if compared to men who worked in their professions for the greater part of their adult lives. Since most of their charms lay in their beauty, their careers only lasted as long as *it* did, and in most of the lives of the women that I have investigated, their careers were only approximately ten years in length. As with most trends, popularity is not long lasting unless there is a concerted effort put forth by the individual to assure that he or she will not be pushed to the side in order to make room for the next new thing. The same is true with the fashion system, and this connection of the courtesan with dazzling lifestyles and glamorous appearances places them well within such limits.

¹⁴ I. M. Davis, *The Harlot and the Statesman: The Story of Elizabeth Armistead & Charles James Fox* (Bourne End: The Kensal Press, 1986), v.

¹⁵ *ibid.* v.

¹⁶ *ibid.* v.

¹⁷ *ibid.* vii.

Constant reinvention is needed, but it appears that this was not an appealing path for the eighteenth-century courtesan; most chose to settle down instead of fighting for continued superiority. It was not uncommon for them to marry well, although in some cases their lives were cut short due to illness or other unfortunate circumstances. Surprisingly, in some cases, advantageous matches were expected and talked about frequently in the press, but this was not the norm by any stretch, and there was always a twinge of malevolence attached to such reports.¹⁸ Their years in the spotlight ensured them lasting recognition, however, and paved the way for those who came after them. In the case of Kitty Fisher, many were still referencing her up to the end of the century, even though by that time she had been dead for at least forty years.

Outline

I will begin my thesis by looking at Kitty Fisher and her lasting influence over how courtesans were understood and perceived during her time, and for the rest of the century, as well. This is shown through comparisons with her painted image, and the images of others who were possibly influenced by her style. I also will discuss the impact of the printed image on the social understanding of the morality of the courtesan and her social function. Chapter two discusses in greater detail the role of courtesans as trendsetters through the portraits of Nelly O'Brien, both painted and engraved. The engraving process and the dissemination of the printed image is also discussed in depth due to its importance to how images were understood by the greater social sphere at this time. The third chapter examines the representations of two courtesans, Grace Elliott and Nancy Parsons, and how these representations received critical acclaim and censure that helps the modern viewer to further understand the full spectrum of the arguments for and against courtesans and the influence of their clothing and accessories. The final section before the conclusion discusses in depth the fashion influence of the actress-cum-courtesan, namely in the

¹⁸ See biographical entries for Nancy Parsons and Elizabeth Armitstead, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Martin J. Levy, "Armitstead, Elizabeth Bridget (1750–1842)" in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004), accessed 25 May 2011, <http://www04.sub.su.se:2164/view/article/47472>, and A. A. Hanham, "Parsons, Anne [Nancy] *married name* Anne Maynard, Viscountess Maynard] (c.1735–1814/15)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, May 2005), accessed 11 May 2011, <http://www04.sub.su.se:2164/view/article/75617>.

form of the celebrated actress Mrs. Frances Abington. Her influence weighed heavily upon the fashion of the time, and this remarkable trend is discussed within the terms of celebrity, stardom, and the rewards of social mobility.

Chapter 1: Kitty Fisher, The Scandalous Trendsetter

Kitty Fisher (d. 1767), born in London of humble origins, is considered to be one of the most prominent and lauded courtesans of not only her time, but of the entire eighteenth century. Her reputation and legacy continued to perpetuate long after her death, and she continued to appear in engraved prints and written texts. Hers was the enduring image of the luxury-bathed courtesan, and it would seem that even though she was not the first, she was definitely the standard to which all others were compared. It was said that, “all the men admired [her], and many of the women envied her.”¹⁹ In looking at portraits painted of Fisher, it is easy to see why she would be considered a style icon for women of her time. Joshua Reynolds painted her frequently during the height of her success, and through his portraits we are able to see how her clothing not only reflects her desire to mirror an image of high fashion and impeccable taste, but also how they make her understood to others as being a woman of means and influence. She was incredibly young when she first burst onto London’s social scene (her birth date is unknown, but it was supposed that she died in her early forties), thus her charms as a bright, young and vivacious demi-rep must have had a definite impact on those around her, whether they wanted to acknowledge her or not. The question remains, however— did she actually succeed in influencing the fashion choices of those around her? And how else did her life impact those who eagerly sought to know more about her?

As in most cases when dealing with portraits of unfamiliar individuals, if one were to remove the identification of the sitter, it would be difficult to classify a well-dressed and poised woman as being anything other than an upper-class woman. The case is no different here. James Northcote, Reynolds’s biographer, remarked that the artist was able to “paint his female sitters as ‘ladies,’ whether or not they were.”²⁰ This—while perhaps the key to Reynolds’s remarkable achievement as a portraitist—was also instrumental to the success of elevating the status of such ladies in the eyes

¹⁹ Horace Bleackley, *Ladies Fair and Frail; Sketches of the Demi-Monde During the Eighteenth Century* (London: J. Lane, 1909), 53.

²⁰ Quoted in Penny 1986, 23.

of those otherwise unfamiliar with the separation of courtesans from run-of-the-mill prostitutes. In this reading of the clothing Kitty Fisher and others, placing Reynolds's or other artists' skills aside, it is almost impossible to distinguish courtesans from ladies of rank and high social standing. Prints and engravings, on the other hand, made this divide much more evident due to, in part, their identifying the sitter on the sheet itself. At this point in my thesis, however, it is through the dress of the courtesan that I will seek to investigate the effect of fashion on both courtesans and women of the higher ranks of society. I will begin this analysis by looking at portraits painted of Kitty Fisher, but will later balance my findings with a look at the influence of satirical prints on the courtesan's image, and whether or not it hindered her influence.

Reynolds painted Fisher at least nine times over the course of her lifetime, and the most telling portrait of her is one where she wears everyday dress. The artist painted the portrait in 1759, and subsequently at least four engravers published prints after it, which continued to be sold for several years to come.²¹ This speaks to her immense popularity, influence, and marketability as a trendsetter, as a painting that was destined for a private residence now had an audience of thousands through the medium of mezzotint engraving. The half-length picture, entitled only *Miss Kitty Fisher* (fig. 1), shows Fisher seated at a narrow, cloth-covered table with only a letter addressed to her laying open on tablecloth. She wears a fashionable dress with a black mantle over her shoulders through which you can see the white fabric of her sleeves. The deeply cut square neckline is bordered with white linen or lace, and the front of the dress sports a stomacher made of ruffled dark green silk.

Stomachers were key components of the *robe à la française* as they were what held the entire dress together. The *robe à la française* had its roots in the *mantua*, which evolved over time to become the standard dress of the British mid-to-late-eighteenth-century woman.²² Surprisingly, it was the popular form of dress in England expressly because of its tight bodice, as "English ladies felt both physically and morally comfortable in a gown which fitted the upper part of the body so tightly."²³ It was composed of three parts: the petticoat, the dress itself (or *robe*, which was put on like a jacket), and the stomacher. This key component had to be

²¹ Penny 1986, 193.

²² Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe, 1715-1789* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 33-39.

²³ Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress and Morality* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 96.

stitched or pinned into the lining of the opening of the dress and therefore could be changed as the wearer saw fit. Without this, the stays would be exposed, but with it (and multiple others, as one could own more stomachers than dresses) one dress could become many, as different stomachers changed the whole look of the garment.

Fisher's lace sleeve engageantes, however, are the most visible component of her outfit, and by far the most luxurious. These tripartite ruffled extensions to her cuffs were exquisite not only because of their size, but also because lace was still an expensive commodity in the eighteenth century. The attention paid to the details of this area of the garment perhaps speaks to this fact. Engageantes were commonly found in the form of single, double, or triple flounced variants, and could be made from lace, cotton, or linen of varying degrees of quality.²⁴ The inclusion of fine lace, such as the kind shown in this painting, indicated the wealth of the sitter, as "lace was the most expensive kind of ornament to adorn a gown" and it is represented here in not a single or double layer, but in a triple flounce.²⁵ The grace with which it is spread across the table lends an air of elevated substance to the overall picture, and the quietness of the folded arms of her pose also suggests an inner composure and breeding that one could argue comes with upbringing, but in this case was learned due to the necessity of living the refined life that a courtesan was purported to lead.

Kitty wears four strings of pearls tied at the back of the neck by a black silk ribbon, complemented on her ears by heavy clip-on earrings. Aileen Ribeiro explains the lack of heavy ornamentation as being "an excellent example of the restrained English version of rococo dress, with its emphasis on the textures of fabrics."²⁶ Fisher displays a simplified, yet sumptuous representation of herself, and by extension, of her profession, which perhaps signifies that she can pass for any lady of rank and position, although obvious factors dictated otherwise. There is another portrait of Fisher from this same period that is very similar in composition, the only differences being in the state of completion (only the face is finished) so it is difficult to compare the two on the basis of dress.²⁷ However, one clear difference is the lower level of ornamentation as the subject only wears a black silk ribbon as a choker (a

²⁴ Akiko Fukai, ed., *Fashion: A History from the 18th to the 20th Century, vol. 1: Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century* (Cologne: Taschen, 2006), 41; also Avril Hart and Susan North, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Fashion in Detail*. (London: V&A Publications, 2009), 222.

²⁵ Fukai 2006, 41.

²⁶ Penny 1986, 193.

²⁷ In a private collection, see Mannings and Postle, 2000, cat. 616.

popular accessory at the time) and large, hanging pearl drop earrings. Although the remaining sartorial details are unclear due to the quick and sketchy nature of the brushstroke, one can still see that she is seated in the same position and wearing a dress and mantle with large cuffs; whether or not they're made of lace is uncertain. The attention given to the face accentuates all of the surrounding details, as in the original picture, Fisher stares directly at the viewer, her gaze steady and level, and her lips forming a small, mysterious smile. This subtle detail confirms in a way her supposed coquettish nature, while Reynolds's other paintings done of other female sitters in a similar style lack this playful spark.

The composition of the painting is a popular one used by Reynolds in his other portraits of society ladies during the late 1750s, both before and after the painting of Fisher was completed and circulating in the print shops.²⁸ This association between courtesan and members of the peerage did not seem to be entirely frowned upon, and when one takes into account the fact that many of Reynolds's portraits of courtesans were not commissioned (and therefore on display in his studio gallery for prospective clients to see), it is possible that some may have requested this pose *because* it was used in the portrait of such a celebrated persona. Cindy McCreery argues that *while* Reynolds and [Allan] Ramsay "chose this ... style to express the fashionable status of their prominent female clients [...] ... fashionable dress did not by itself, of course, denote an unrespectable woman."²⁹ McCreery brings up an important point here, namely that well-dressed women in portraiture were not automatically recognized as being decidedly on one side or another of the moral fence; a closer reading into the details of the paintings had to take place. Although she continues to state that, "the image of a fashionable dressed woman with crossed hands conjures up elegance without scandal," I would argue that this supposition is not always the case when looking at paintings done in this style by Reynolds.³⁰ The connection of scandal with these images was something that was possibly important to the consumer of these images at this time. The emulation of the fashion of such individuals could be seen as

²⁸ *ibid.* 193. Figs. 3 and 4 also attest to this.

²⁹ Cindy McCreery 2004, 87. Allan Ramsay (1713-1784) was a Scottish contemporary of Reynolds and court painter to George III.

³⁰ *ibid.* 87.

bringing immediacy to someone's way of dressing, without actually bearing the scandal of the individual.³¹

Fashion versus Morality

The high level of visibility of prostitution in general, and higher still the exposure of such diamond-draped high-class mistresses and courtesans, must have within the general population to some degree ignited a desire for emulation, indeed because of its very opposition to everything moral and "acceptable." Lady Caroline Fox (1723-74) wrote to her sister in the same year that the Petworth picture (fig. 1) was painted that she pointedly disliked the style of outfitting that took after Fisher, in either "dress or manner, which all the young women affect now."³² Unlike the scandalous sort of dress possibly imagined by the twenty-first century viewer as being the type bemoaned by Lady Caroline, it is more likely that it was actually only impeccable, refined fashion that possibly, at times, bordered on the side of overly ornamental, replete with fashionable accessories.³³ Biographer Horace Bleackley describes Fisher as "always attired with consummate taste, and no woman was more clever in choosing a gown to suit her style of beauty."³⁴ But so excessive was her outward display of cultivated opulence that she was accused by moralists of "seducing [women] from the paths of virtue by her display of luxury."³⁵

In the case of the portrait of Lady Caroline Adair, née Keppel (1757-9, fig. 2), one can see the direct influence of the styles on one another. This portrait is only one of many that portray well-born sitters in a similar pose (figs. 3 and 4).³⁶ Lady Adair was the sister of the well-known admiral and later Member of Parliament (MP) Augustus, 1st Viscount Keppel. Surprisingly, Admiral Keppel was also not only the avenue through which Kitty Fisher "first made her appearance as a courtesan [*sic*],"

³¹ Hinging new successes to his old ones was part of Reynolds's studio practice. "Indeed, rather than disguise such repetitions, Reynolds made them a cornerstone of his practice. In his studio, he kept a portfolio of prints after his paintings so that his clients could select specific formats and poses to be adapted in their own portraits" ("Anne (Barry) Irwin," The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, accessed on 24 May 2011, <http://tinyurl.com/3q3q5rs>).

³² Quoted in Mannings and Postle 2000, 188.

³³ Compare to the heavily ornamented dress of Ramsay's sitter Elizabeth Albertina (fig. 7).

³⁴ Bleackley 1909, 54.

³⁵ *ibid.* 59.

³⁶ "Anne (Barry) Irwin" entry. Even further comparisons with other sitters by other artists are influenced by another portrait, supposedly of Kitty Fisher (fig. 5). Note the similarities in the hair ornamentation and muff in figs. 6 and 7, which are two portraits by Ramsay.

but also the person responsible for introducing her to Reynolds.³⁷ Although this portrait was painted before that of Fisher's, there is something to be said about the repetition in composition and dress.

Lady Adair sits in a pose almost identical to the famed courtesan, with her body forming an equilateral triangle, her arms crossed at the elbows forming its base. She too wears lace engageantes at her cuffs (most likely double, but also possibly triple flounces), a black mantle, and a pearled choker at her neck. The difference between the two portraits, however, is astronomical. The overall feeling of the aristocratic portrait is one devoid of anything sensuous or coquette, but instead drastically demure. The folding of the arms suggests stability and politeness, which is accentuated by the simplicity of her dress, as the fashionable details that are so visible and present in Fisher's portrait are absent here.³⁸ Somber solid black material replaces the stylish woven black net of the mantle; the gauzy material of Adair's fichu, which has been tightly overlapped and therefore only exposing a tiny triangle of skin at the base of her neck, obscures her decorated stomacher; and instead of the viewer being dazzled by the brightness of four tiers of jewelry, they are instead confronted with a single strand of pearls that overlap a tightly tied black silk ribbon choker. All of the details visible in her clothing suggest restraint and modesty, with only the inclusion of her exquisitely made bobbin lace engageantes visible to ensure the viewer that she is a lady of means and rank.

The fact that most of the sartorial elements in Adair's picture seek to cover up and conceal provides a direct contrast to Fisher's very transparent portrayal. This is quite literal, as the low-cut neckline of her dress, though a common feature in every woman's dress, physically leaves her skin to the scrutiny of others, while the draped mantle across her shoulders exposes the material beneath. This symbolically relates to Kitty's open nature, as she was open about her profession and made no secret of it; on the contrary, the publicity she received was at times almost too overwhelming. At one point, she found it necessary to publish a letter in a daily newspaper demanding that her name *and* image cease to be dragged through the press and displayed in print

³⁷ Penny 1986, 193.

³⁸ It is important to note, however, that Lady Adair was not free from scandal in her lifetime. The year that this painting was completed (1759), she married a man lower in standing than she, much to the disapproval of her family and peers. One commentator remarked, "There is certainly something nasty in the idea of a woman of fashion falling in love with her surgeon." Mannings and Postle 2000, 58.

shops (respectively).³⁹ In this case, the print made after the original Petworth picture was an instant engraved success, possibly fueled by the consumer's thought that through their purchase, one "gained a window on the lives of top courtesans, and by extension on the luxurious and apparently carefree world of elite society."⁴⁰ This transparency was something that her professional success relied upon, as the quality of her appearance would further her chances of successfully maintaining her lifestyle. But as a courtesan, opposed to a common prostitute, there was more to the equation than just the physical components, as one had to be capable of being good company. This included, but was not limited to, being able to converse intelligently, appreciate the arts, and remain elegant whilst doing so. Fisher in addition to being seen out and socializing with the *crème de la crème*, she was an avid horsewoman who regularly rode in St James's Park, which was an area well-situated near both the affluent areas of town, as well as court.⁴¹ Everything she did seems like it was a calculated effort to achieve as much recognition and fame as possible.

States of Undress and Image Consumption

There are multiple other paintings that show Fisher in more personal settings, where clothing plays an central role. I will discuss two here, one by Reynolds and the other by Nathaniel Hone (1718-1784). The first portrait was a later work produced by the artist (fig. 8), completed only about three years before the sitter's death. Completed in 1763-64, it shows the courtesan seated in a tall-backed, leather upholstered chair in the artist's studio. She is represented as being in the midst of entertaining Reynolds's pet parrot, which sits on her outstretched hand.⁴² This time, Kitty does not engage directly with the viewer, but instead seems to be completely enthralled with the bird on her finger, and the painting (especially since it is in an unfinished state) seems to capture her unawares. She wears a brighter palette than in the previous example, her cloak a dusky shade of dark pink and bordered with white fur, and her dress a bright white collection of fabric with a tight bodice whose neckline is virtually indistinguishable from her flesh. It is possible that her dress is not a traditional eighteenth-century garment with a plunging neckline, but instead has a high neck, but

³⁹ Postle et al. 2005, 182.

⁴⁰ McCreery 2004, 87.

⁴¹ McCreery 2004, 87.

⁴² Postle et al. 2005, 184.

some scholars suggest that, “what appears to be a gold necklace is probably a gold braid edging to the neck of her dress.”⁴³ If this is the case, then it would be appropriate to assume that the dress she wears is some form of negligée or indoor costume, further supported by the fact that the sleeves of the garment are loose, they lack any kind of familiar cuff or sleeve ruffle, and they sport pearl garters at the elbow. These elements all seem to suggest fantasy rather than fact. With regards to the prevailing notions of morality of the time, loose clothing was regarded as sinful, as its ability to hide the shape of the body was thought by some as being “useful for hiding stolen goods and even pregnancies.”⁴⁴ As opposed to modern views on the connection between clothing and morality, the eighteenth-century audience was less attentive to the shape of the body itself, as “the figure was much more the centre [*sic*] of beauty than the face.”⁴⁵ What we see as maybe revealing and titillating (low necklines, tight bodices, corset-manipulated waistlines) was not necessarily so to those at the time.

On the other hand, although less likely, it is possible that Kitty could be wearing one of Reynolds’s pseudo-classical costumes that were popular with his female sitters, as the V-shaped neckline is similar (if one chooses to interpret the brushstrokes here as being so), and the sleeves also follow the prescribed pattern. The pink cloak could also be a studio prop, as a similar article is featured in the full-length portrait *Mrs. Jelf Powis and Her Daughter* (1777, fig. 9), where the sitter is also clad in the pseudo-classical dress.

Technicalities aside, Miss Fisher is shown in a moment of reprieve from her public image, where she is always seen wearing carefully selected clothing and accessories, and with a guarded demeanor to accompany such elegance. Here she sits by herself, her hair unpowdered and pulled up in a simple hairstyle consisting of a braid wrapped around her head like a headband, very little jewelry (if indeed the gold ornament at her neck is even a necklace), and no distinguishable finery of her own. She is between states of dress and undress, which in the early modern era still denoted the presence of clothing, and this in-between-states is also reflected in the mood of the picture.

⁴³ Mannings and Postle 2000, 189.

⁴⁴ Ribeiro 2003, 96.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

Irish painter Nathaniel Hone painted Fisher in full *deshabillé* in 1765 (fig. 10). Even though the face is somewhat dissimilar to the other representations looked at thus far by Reynolds, the attribution was perhaps meant to be unmistakable by the inclusion of two details: a black cat (Kitty) pawing at a glass bowl full of goldfish (Fisher). She wears what seems to be a bluish-silver, loosely fitting nightgown, but holds up a gold embroidered green shawl to her chest in an attempt at modesty, the cloth gingerly held between her fingertips. As opposed to the previous portrait, in this state of undress she wears a few pieces of jewelry, namely a striking necklace made out of small beads of coral that is wrapped around her neck several times, a multi-strand pearl bracelet, and pearl stud earrings. Her hair has been let down and is now tied in the back in a loose ponytail, which is another sign that she is not meant to be seen by the public.

Although her surroundings are hard to accurately distinguish, namely because the foreground takes much precedence, as does the red curtain behind her, in the fish bowl, one can see the reflection of a window through which a mass of people are looking through, hoping to catch a glimpse of the famous courtesan.⁴⁶ This sets the scene as being her household, although other elements suggest that she is in an artist's studio. Regardless of the exact location, due to the clothing worn by the sitter, this scene could be read as also a sort of *levée*. Women of all social ranks participated in this ritual on a daily basis, though the upper classes had rituals that were drastically different from those in the lower rungs of society. This was an oft illustrated social phenomenon that frequently depicted a woman of the middle class and her maid getting make-up and clothing sorted for the day, and sometimes they were joined by hairdressers, milliners, members of the clergy, and businessmen who had issues to settle; in short it was the time of day when the woman conducted most of her business, both personal and familial, all while dressed informally. Here Kitty is waking, preparing herself to meet the masses thronging to catch a glimpse of her.

Satirically, different draftsmen have documented the *levée* of the prostitute over the course of the mid-to-late eighteenth century. William Hogarth, before developing an entire series of engravings about the rise and fall of a prostitute (*A Harlot's Progress*, 1732), he drafted a small red chalk drawing of a prostitute and her

⁴⁶ "Catherine Maria 'Kitty' Fisher," National Portrait Gallery, accessed 19 February 2011, <http://tinyurl.com/6x4hdsk>.

maid preparing for the day.⁴⁷ As opposed to the relative opulence of the décor of Kitty Fisher's surroundings, this is a squalid heap that includes only the barest of necessities (a bed, a dressing table, and laundry hanging indoors from the rafters). On the dressing table, bottles of medicines replace perfume and pomade jars that were staples of the middle class woman's morning preparation. While the unnamed prostitute sets to work at cleaning herself up, we see her getting ready without an audience (excluding the presence of her peg-legged maid who is assisting her with her morning ritual). She looks haggard, with a worn face and her long hair held back away from her face with a wide headband. Her robe is short, only extending to her thigh, and her dressing gown is either tattered at the hem or fur-lined (it is unclear which). Instead of applying makeup to her face, she sets herself to wrapping her arm with a bandage, and I propose this could possibly be to insinuate the perilous life she leads.⁴⁸ In the right foreground, "corsets and hoopskirts and a man's hat are lying about," but it is next to impossible to distinguish what is what in the jumbled pile.⁴⁹ Hogarth painted another version of this scene, retaining the squalid interior but exchanging the old prostitute with a younger and fresher model, who was regarded as having a "pretty Countenance & air" and "careless" deshabillé.⁵⁰

Another view of the harlot's levée is in the form of *The Morning Tost; or Fanny M—'s Maid Washing her Toes* (1751/2, fig. 11), an anonymous satirical engraving that shows the Kitty Fisher's predecessor, Fanny Murray (1729-78), getting ready in the company of four other individuals. Fanny, whose portrait is nondescript and incongruent with the known portraits of her, sits in the middle of the scene with her maid squatting on her knees directly in front of Fanny with a towel to dry her left foot, which is hovering over a pot of water. The maid averts her eyes, but directly across from Fanny sits an oafish man by a small container of oysters. As he is in the direct line of sight of her lifted leg, his eyes are riveted to the area, while proceeding to clean the oysters near him. While she gets her hair done by a tall and silent hairdresser, she reads a notice of executions in a newspaper. In the far left of the scene, a leering clergyman stands hunchbacked and holding a rolled up paper labeled "Deed of Settlement" under his arm.

⁴⁷ Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth: His Life and Times, vol. 1* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 76, 238.

⁴⁸ *ibid.* 238.

⁴⁹ *ibid.* 238.

⁵⁰ *ibid.* 239.

This twist on the classic *levée* (with the exception of the inclusion of oysters) presents a darkly sardonic scene, as all of the characters seem to be grossly exaggerated into uncomfortable positions and postures. The symbolism of many of the elements in the picture all point towards the evils and vices that go hand-in-hand with this lifestyle (i.e. capital punishment, lust), yet the main characters remain unfazed and continue as they were.

Fanny's character wears a dressing robe similar to that of Hogarth's drawing, though longer and seemingly made out of (relatively) finer fabric. The scene here is decidedly different and one can easily see the difference between a common prostitute's surroundings and that of the more privileged courtesan. Even though Fanny's interior is sparsely decorated and almost devoid of furniture and other fixtures, it is clean and empty while retaining its original moldings. On the other hand, this could be due to not being about to support her lifestyle, or selling all of her goods to keep up appearances. Her state of undress is seen by all and does not suggest immodesty on her part. This is possibly a trait not reserved only for prostitutes, as other paintings of scandalous *levées* were popular during this time, not the least among the French (fig. 12). The undress exhibited by Fanny Murray illustrates the contrast between the other clothed individuals in the room. She is almost glorified, free from any sort of extreme caricature, while the men (and to an extent, the maid) all resemble extreme versions of the parts that they each are supposed to play. Furthermore, Fanny and Kitty are similar in their imagined morning rituals as they both are under the gaze and discriminating view of others. Within these scenes is illustrated the visual consumption of the actions of a courtesan by the eyes of the public, which is then furthermore literally consumed by the purchasing of the print. The *levee* was by no means a private ritual, but in light of the increasing curiosity into the lives of women who made their living by operating in a state of undress, the voyeurism at play here is somewhat unsettling.

Kitty Fisher was truly a remarkable woman in her circle, who did what most of her contemporaries could not: she totally and completely captivated the attention of an entire population. She was written about in newspapers, poems (both flattering and not), prints, portraits, and watch papers. Bleackley notes that her "supremacy was absolute" during a period spanning only five years, which is probably even more

remarkable when one thinks of the fleeting nature of fame.⁵¹ But on the other hand, it is highly significant when one takes into account that she chose her exit, instead of reluctantly relenting it.

It is clear through looking at the portraits that she played a part influencing, that Kitty was indeed a fashion influence for women of her time. Not only was this influence sartorial in nature, but it was also deeply tied to the image of a luxurious lifestyle. This wish to consume images of celebrated people, and in turn mimic their styles, is something that I will discuss in more depth in the next chapter. Even though many sought to be like her, it is difficult to see whether or not they succeeded, for Kitty Fisher “stood alone and incomparable, the recipient of no reflected glory” and “eclipsed” all others that were in her orbit, and her image became the standard for the fashionable, opulent and unattainable courtesan.⁵²

Chapter 2: Nelly O’Brien: Fashion and the Influence of the Printed vs. the Painted Image

Nelly O’Brien (d. 1768), one of the most recognized beauties of London’s Cyprian Corps, was another of Reynolds’s favorite subjects. He painted her on several occasions, and judging by the written record, it can be assumed that they were close friends.⁵³ She was a reputed beauty and although popular among the rich and influential, she did not reach the same height of fame as her contemporary Kitty Fisher. It is interesting to note, however, that in Reynolds’s first recorded portrait of her (1762-64, fig. 13), she sits in a way that recalls Fisher’s 1759 portrait (fig. 1), but this time the viewer is privy to an expanded view. Here, there is no table to lean upon and this permits one to fully view her knees and skirt. In a way also like Fisher, Nelly is able to capitalize on her fame and spread a fashionable image of herself that others would want to possess and be inspired by. In this chapter I delve deeper into the power of the printed image, and question whether or not it served to transmit fashionability to a wider audience.

⁵¹ Bleackley 1909, 96.

⁵² It is worth noting that Fisher was buried in her finest dress, and Bleackley describes the scene as such: “Thus, attired in her costliest finery, with satin ribbons and sparkling jewels, Kitty Fisher was prepared for the tomb, lying in her coffin decked out as for a ball.” Bleackley 1909, 94.

⁵³ Mannings and Postle 2000, 355.

Shown situated outdoors, the sunlight hits Nelly from the side, illuminating her dress so that the details are vibrant and distinguishable. Although frontal compositions were common, many chose to be shown in profile, which decreased the level of eye contact with the viewer. Nelly still looks out at the viewer and connects with his or her gaze, her smile slight, but confident and at ease. Her face is shaded, however, due to the brim of her ribbon-topped straw hat casting a shadow over her features. Under her hat she wears a “winged and wired cap with lace edging,” small pearl earrings, and a matching strand of large pearls tied closely about her neck.⁵⁴ This draws the viewer’s attention to her décolletage, which, unlike many of the dresses of the era, is not square, but instead a plunging “V.” This may only be, however, because of the black lace shawl around her shoulders being clasped above the neckline of the dress, thus obscuring it from view. The blue and white striped robe of the dress is worn over a pink quilted petticoat, which is most prominently on display due to the extra length afforded it due to the crossing of her legs beneath it. At the openings of her elbow-length sleeves are striped, gently scalloped ruffles made from the same material as the robe, as well as a set of flowing double lace engageantes.

The sheer amount of fabric on display is staggering when one takes into account the individual details. The skirt is the most noticeable, with the blue and white fabric acting as a sort of framing element to the magnificent spread of the quilted fabric. Quilted petticoats (figs. 14 and 15) were common fixtures in every Englishwoman’s wardrobe, regardless of station, but as Nelly’s is presumably made from silk or silk satin, her skirt most likely signals that she is a woman of means.⁵⁵ Despite what one would believe based on the number of surviving examples of dresses made from the material, silk was considered to be a high luxury item in the eighteenth century. The reasons for its exclusivity include cost, labor, demand, and scarcity. At least two of the main steps of production were taxed, as raw silk was almost always imported and the favorite woven silks of the aristocracy were shipped in from Lyon, France.⁵⁶ Even though the English had their own local silk weaving industry centered in Spitalfields (East London) the prices still remained high due to

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ “Quilted Petticoats,” Rockin’ the Rococo [dressmaker’s blog], October 2008, accessed 8 June 2011, <http://brocadegoddess.wordpress.com/quilted-petticoat/>. See also Fukai 2006, 59

⁵⁶ Ribeiro 2002, 56-7.

the complicated nature of the craft and the high demand for quality products.⁵⁷ It was also common for fabric to be saved for use long after their initial manufacture. The silk used in an English sack-back gown from the 1760s from the collection of the Museum of London originated in France, but actually was not crafted into the gown for another five to ten years (figs. 16 and 17).⁵⁸

Quilted petticoats could incorporate highly intricate designs—ranging from geometric to vegetal patterns—or very basic ones, such as the lattice motif seen in the painting. Quilting was not restricted to just petticoats, as gowns could be made entirely of such fabric, stomacher included, and could incorporate extremely detailed needlework (fig. 18). Here, however, the lack of heavy ornamentation is made up for with the presence of a “transparent gauze apron,” which is itself patterned, whether in lace or another kind of embroidery.⁵⁹ In all probability, it is in fact lace-embroidered silk gauze, and this extra detail also boosts the visual capital of her dress.

This shows that Nelly O’Brien has taken something ordinary, i.e. the plain lattice-woven petticoat, and made into something extraordinary by combining it with the other elements of her dress, thus heightening its unique quality and raising its desirability. Aprons were common fixtures in the eighteenth-century woman’s wardrobe, and they were usually thin in nature, as with this example here.⁶⁰ It seems logical that if a dress did not feature an elaborately decorated petticoat, such as a plain lattice-woven quilted version, then an apron would enhance the decorative qualities of the skirt area. Added floral details (whether embroidered or added on by a milliner) were also common fixtures in dress, as seen in fashion magazines and the stage costume of leading actresses.⁶¹

Stripes were just coming into fashion during the early 1760s, as heavily brocaded or embroidered silks with floral patterning were the norm for upper class women (figs. 19 and 20).⁶² As the rage for stripes hit its stride only during the early part the 1770s, Nelly can be considered a trendsetter and a true proponent of this

⁵⁷ *ibid.* 56.

⁵⁸ Database entry from Museum of London’s internal catalogue, object number A12398.

⁵⁹ Mannings and Postle 2000, 355.

⁶⁰ Conversation with fashion and textiles curator Beatrice Behlen at the Museum of London, 19 May 2011.

⁶¹ Extracted engravings from women’s fashion magazines from Museum of London’s collection, see figs. 21 and 22; Additional information from conversation with Behlen regarding the floral details, 19 May 2011.

⁶² Aileen Ribeiro commentary in Mannings and Postle 2000, 355.

style.⁶³ Although stripes were indeed popular in France throughout the 1730s, the same kind of prominence was not seen in Britain until later, as witnessed by the overwhelmingly popular resurgence of this style decades later.⁶⁴ This could be explained by the previously mentioned practice of waiting to use fabric, which could influence the delayed dissemination of certain trends. Add to this the strong silk trade ties with France, it is possible that French fabric popular in the 1730s could have experienced delayed popularity on English shores. The combination of stripes and florals, however, was prominent over the course of the 1750s-70s, especially in examples of woven silk.⁶⁵ It is perhaps of some significance to mention that the Museum of London's inventory contains only examples of stripes-and-floral combinations; no simply solid stripes as seen in this portrait exists.⁶⁶ Looking at examples from other collections do indicate that this was a popular style in England, but this also possibly denotes the rarity of such a fashion, and thus testifies to its exclusivity as a luxury fashion item in high English society of the 1760-70s.

The presence of boldly striped fabric, however, speaks to O'Brien's ability to not only keep up with current trends, but also to push them further into the eyes of the public, therefore advancing their popularity. It is very possible that those who saw this dress, whether via the painting itself or in any other engravings, would compel others to emulate this style, for the sole reason that she (that is to say, a popular person in the current limelight) was wearing it. It is the same today, with fashion magazines relying heavily on photos of celebrities wearing current or upcoming fashions to sell their goods. Bärbel Sill points out that actress Gwyneth Paltrow as a fashion icon is a "goldmine" to the fashion industry.⁶⁷ "Gwyneth sells clothes like no other actress... [Women] are desperately seeking Gwyneth. If she's wearing a particular item, then women want it."⁶⁸ This same phenomenon existed in the eighteenth century, as fashion magazines included among their engraved plates of anonymous models sporting "The Dress of 17—" (fig. 21) those of certain aristocrats wearing the dress of

⁶³ On the popularity of stripes, see Fukai 2006, 62.

⁶⁴ See paintings from the 1730-40s by Jean-Siméon Chardin for comparison, especially *Woman Sealing a Letter* (1733, Stiftung Preussische Schlösser und Gärten, Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin), published in Pierre Rosenberg's *Chardin* (2000) cat. 33, pp. 190-191.

⁶⁵ Fukai 2006, 60-62.

⁶⁶ Conversation with Behlen, 19 May 2011.

⁶⁷ Sill 2008, 137.

⁶⁸ *ibid.* 137.

the day (fig. 22, advertising the clothing of the Duchess of Marlborough and her children). I will return to this in greater detail as this chapter progresses.

Celebrity, Display and The Spread of Images

This portrait was in all likelihood not the product of a commission, and as a result, the painting stayed on display in the gallery of the artist for eight years after its completion. As mentioned earlier, this was another way that the female upper-class members of London society could familiarize themselves with the style of this subset of the population. Their fashion was the only aspect of their liberated lifestyle that could be attained in a tangible way. Maintaining a fashionable self was, of course, one of the chief duties that enhanced the profitability of the courtesan herself, as she relied on “the continued display both of [herself] and of [her image]” to preserve her position at the forefront of the public eye.⁶⁹ Courtesans’ portraits found equal footing among pictures of aristocratic sitters at the annual exhibitions of the Royal Academy and the Society of Artists, as pictures from both social subsets were displayed anonymously side-by-side.⁷⁰ Separate, independently written exhibition guides were published, both in pamphlet form as well as in newspapers. Not all viewers counted themselves among the ranks of the moralists, as was evidenced by the many favorable reviews for such paintings praising the beauty of such sitters, though the commentators never missed the opportunity to hint at any shocking morsel that they could associate with them.⁷¹

Negative comments in the press about the visibility of such women showed that there was “anxiety at courtesans’ penetration of elite society” as they could be seen as usurping the role of “aristocratic ladies [as] the traditional leaders of female society.”⁷² McCreery clearly explains these underlying fears, asserting that this slippery slope was connected to fashion (as was previously seen in the letter bemoaning the rage for following Kitty Fisher’s style). With the lack of barriers preventing courtesans from being painted in the same manner as “high-born” women, the worry existed that “aristocratic ladies [would] now adopt the behavior as well as

⁶⁹ McCreery 2004, 84.

⁷⁰ *ibid.* 106.

⁷¹ Christine Riding, “Mrs. Grace Elliott,” in *Gainsborough*, ed. Michael Rosenthal et al. (London: Tate, 2002), catalogue entry no. 52.

⁷² McCreery 2004, 93.

the fashionable dresses of courtesans.”⁷³ As much as these comments might have reflected the general fears of society, they also pushed those who viewed images of these women to seek them further as “it was this danger that made looking at courtesans more exciting.”⁷⁴ The thrill that came along with dressing in such a “borderline-immoral” way is, I believe, exactly the impetus for women to actually emulate this dress. It is highly probably that those that did choose to dress in such a manner did not consider the act of dressing to be as morally reprehensible as critics would have wanted them to believe.

Another portrait of Nelly O’Brien (fig. 23a) was displayed in 1763 at the Society of Artists exhibition alongside another Reynolds’s composition featuring the Ladies Elizabeth and Henrietta Montagu. Robert Jones suggests that this juxtaposition between “pure and impure” speaks of “some kind of reading [that] would have taken place in the spaces between the canvasses” as the positioning of these paintings results in “a structure of display which holds in balance, but leaves available for comparison, two forms of femininity, one intimate, the other almost defiantly public.”⁷⁵ This “defiantly public” form of femininity is at the core of this portrait of O’Brien, as her level gaze dares the viewer to look at her, and to accept her presence in an arena where she would otherwise not be welcome. The display of these pictures is indicative of another kind of social mobility for the courtesan, one which is usually applied to her access to a liberated life that many women envied, but here it counted as her ability to blend in while standing out amid the other portraits of those who came to witness the spectacle.

The Engraved Portrait

Moving outside of the general display of the academy and once again into the print shop, it is interesting to note the popularity of the courtesan in print form. Over the course of the century, these women proved to be financially lucrative subjects for British engravers. The prints that I will be referring to differ from those that I described in the previous chapter, for as opposed to satirical works that were made for social or political reasons and were not to be considered works of portraiture, these

⁷³ *ibid.* 93.

⁷⁴ *ibid.* 93.

⁷⁵ Robert W. Jones, *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain: The Analysis of Beauty* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 129.

mezzotints are works made after specific portraits by well-renowned artists. The fame of the artist and the sitter was crucial to the success of the printmaker, as his artistic alliances determined whether or not his prints would turn a profit.

Initially, however, it is important to set prints within their proper context of the eighteenth century. As they were reproductive in nature, this means that they were strictly repetitions of previously existing pictures. Timothy Clayton situates this method of artistic output in a context that the modern-day reader/viewer is sure to understand:

Until photography became cheap enough to replace it, the print was the principal medium for conveying visual information, the chief means of remembering what a painting or a building looked like. [...] [B]y reproducing paintings, [engravings] allowed many to enjoy what would otherwise have been the exclusive property of one man.⁷⁶

As the paintings that I refer to in this thesis were at the time the private property of the commissioner or purchaser, there were precious few occasions for the general public to view them (outside of the artist's studio or at the annual academic exhibitions). Postcards and digital images were of course non-existent, thus the print was the primary means by which many could acquire these works in their own right.⁷⁷ It is also important to stress the fact that as the majority of consumers only saw the ensuing prints after a painting, particulars relating to color were lost due to the black-and-white nature of the medium.⁷⁸ Another vital point is the fact that prints after portraits existed in order to “translat[e] a painting into another medium in order to make it known.”⁷⁹

As far as the process was concerned, artists either granted permission for their works to be printed, or engravers took it upon themselves to make prints after popular portraits; copyright had not yet developed into the complex issue it is today.⁸⁰ Many artists, however, welcomed the additional publicity that engravings gave their work and often worked closely with those in the trade to produce works after their most

⁷⁶ Clayton 1997, xi.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, xi.

⁷⁸ *ibid.* xi.

⁷⁹ *ibid.* xi. For more on the importance of prints to the eighteenth-century Englishman, Clayton's introductory chapter serves to solidly place prints within their historical context and further the understanding of their vital importance to culture in this century.

⁸⁰ Postle et al. 2005, 50.

popular pieces. Reynolds was no exception as he worked with some of the finest mezzotinters in London.⁸¹ The fact that multiple engravers produced works after many of Reynolds's portraits of courtesans suggests that these women were looked upon as being figures that the public considered to be not only fascinating, but also veritable highly consumable personas in their own right.

Mezzotint engraving was well suited to the replication of painted portraits as it was possible able to achieve a high level of finesse and clarity that sometimes evaded the original medium. Due to the manufacturing method, not only could they be fast and cheap items to produce, they could also present "a crisp, legible image" that, among other things, served to render sartorial details in greater clarity.⁸² It is beneficial when looking at these portraits to compare the original oil version with the printed one, as details such as patterns, accessories, and otherwise unnoticed items found on clothing can be infinitely clearer to distinguish and recognize.

Mezzotints were usually produced on a plate that ranged in size from 6 by 4, to 10 by 14, to 14 by 16 inches (10 by 15, 25 by 36, and 36 by 41 centimeters, respectively), so they were small enough to collect and contain in albums, or to be displayed on the walls of one's home.⁸³ This meant that even though the originals—both of painting and person—were not attainable to the masses, a reduced, yet still refined, copy was available for anyone willing to pay. In printmakers catalogues, courtesans are sometimes found among other well-known figures of their day, and, in one particular catalogue from 1775, they are listed as belonging to the group of portraits identified as "The Most Celebrated Beauties of the Present Time."⁸⁴

Beauty and Exposure

On the surface, there is no separation of aristocrat from women of scandalous reputation; both sets intermingle as prints on paper as equals. The word "beauty" however, had another meaning during this time and Robert Jones explains it as such in relation to Elizabeth Gunning, who was an aristocratic lady and famed beauty of her time:

⁸¹ *ibid.* 50.

⁸² *ibid.* 50.

⁸³ *ibid.* 52.

⁸⁴ *ibid.* 55. Collecting pictures of beautiful women is a practice that has its roots in the Renaissance. See Shearer West's discussion of this in *Portraiture* (Oxford University Press, 2004, 152).

[She], who was frequently identified as a ‘Beauty’, would have represented a particular form of publically [*sic*] visible woman—close (or at least potentially so) to the figure of the actress or the prostitute. To be a ‘Beauty’ was, in the popular idiom of the period, not merely to be a beautiful woman, but to be a figure whose existence was defined by their [*sic*] publicized (and it could be very public) attractiveness. [...] But it was her function as a public spectacle, which is most striking. For it marked on the one hand her commodification and loss of privacy, while on the other hand endowed her with the dubious empowerment appropriate to a woman of her charms. This dichotomy is indicative of the ambiguous and overdetermined nature of beauty in eighteenth-century discourse.⁸⁵

In applying this concept to the label given to the courtesans as being “celebrated beauties,” it is clear that was understood that such women who capitalized on the visibility and recognition of their good looks belonged to a category of women who could be bought—both in image and in person. This publicized recognition of attractiveness went hand in hand with power, which was surely (according to the above definition) only to rest with men.

It is only by becoming a recognized figure, one noted for her significant beauty (and the apparent loss of virtue that went along with it) that women were able to climb onto an equal playing field, however uneven and stripped bare of the assumption of a morally unstained character. “... To be beautiful [...] on one hand raise[s] and endorse[s] women’s public presence, while on the other hand damn[s] the beautiful as a source of enervating femininity.”⁸⁶ It is a complicated series of issues that is made even more difficult to fully comprehend due to the popular views on gender equality held today, but it is through these glimpses into eighteenth-century discourse that we learn more about how these images were understood and subsequently used by those who were their original consumers.

Consuming and Copying

In his essay on Reynolds and the printed image, Clayton asserts that men were the target audience and main consumer of prints of these celebrated courtesans.⁸⁷ While

⁸⁵ Robert W. Jones, “‘Such Unwonted Softness to Excuse’: Judgment and Indulgence in Sir Joshua Reynolds’s Portrait of Elizabeth Gunning, Duchess of Hamilton and Argyll,” *The Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1995): 30.

⁸⁶ *ibid.* 30.

⁸⁷ Postle et al. 2005, 53.

men most certainly would have a veritable reason for purchasing such prints, I believe that women also had distinct reasons, as well, for wanting to possess such images.⁸⁸ As explained earlier, some painted portraits were commissioned and purchased by and for upper-class individuals, the middle-class consumer would not be able to come easily into possession of such objects due to their exclusive nature (regardless of the studio of the artist made copies of popular portraits for individual sale).

Middle-class consumers, however, were able to easily come into possession of prints. Not only were they readily attainable, but they “played an essential role in forming taste and fashion, while at the same time ownership of prints demonstrated possession of taste and knowledge of fashion.”⁸⁹ Typical homes of those belonging to this class featured prints pasted to the walls, on furniture, and in albums for perusal.⁹⁰ Then, as now, women culled inspiration for which styles to emulate and replicate from images taken from a variety of printed materials, including fashion plates, magazines, and mezzotints of celebrities. The latter of these works on paper were produced in close chronological proximity to the cycle of artistic exhibitions (Royal Academy and Society of Artists, the two largest), and as these exhibitions were open to the public, people of all social classes could view the paintings of these women before they again became inaccessible. This public display, which was closely documented in the press (i.e. which paintings were the best, worst, most scandalous, etc.), came to define for most what was trendy, acceptable, and worth echoing.

As I mentioned previously, the detail that mezzotints afford can surpasses that of oil painting, as what dazzling aspects of dress one loses when the format changes from color to black, white and gray, one gains in the clear recognition of particular intricacies of clothing. In light of the most recent example, the mezzotint published by Ryland and Bryer of Nelly O’Brien (fig. 23b) shows her silk gauze apron in crisper detail, as the floral pattern on the cloth is virtually indistinguishable from the petticoat in Reynolds’s original. The beauty of the oil medium lies in the smooth and fluid lines

⁸⁸ Watch papers, a different type of engraving, were small etched prints that contained portraits of famous people within circular frames, which could be then cut out and pasted into the inside of pocket watch cases as both decoration and protection. Both Kitty Fisher and Nelly O’Brien’s portraits appear in this format, and since watches were more frequently men’s accessories, here I agree that a typically male audience on a majority scale consumed the courtesan’s image. See Timothy Clayton’s essay in Postle et al. 2005 for his full description of such objects (pg. 54).

⁸⁹ Clayton 1997, xii.

⁹⁰ *ibid.* xii.

that help painted flesh and textures resemble those in real life. Focused sharpness and pictorial clarity are laid aside in favor of painterly details that contribute to a more realistic image. While this remains the purpose of paintings, engravings are allowed much greater liberty to create a different kind of reality, one that in turn showcases textures and the subtle differences between light and dark in a more dramatic and arresting manner. Mezzotints in particular are a satisfactory middle ground between painting and line engraving, as the lines produced by the technique are softer than those of etching, but they still manage to retain a level of clarity that evades oil painting. These advantages that are inherent to the medium could in all probability have encouraged female patrons to purchase such prints in order to obtain a clear and specific image after which they could pattern their own clothing.⁹¹ Taking into account the high level of distribution of these images, the number of prints that were consumed by the population of course means that many could replicate the fashion shown. Thus, this method of producing pictures for immediate sale could have been the century's way of exponentially perpetuating a single style.

In a way, these courtesans acted as fashion models for the different styles and trends of the eighteenth century, as women related to them much in the same way as twenty-first-century women do to actresses that grace the pages of the large fashion magazines. These women are not a part of the fashion industry *per se* as they do not walk down the catwalk during Fashion Week as anonymous participants, nor do they work as buyers, merchandisers, or editors. Their function lies more in the idea that they are fashionable because they are photographed wearing fashionable items and in turn identified and described as doing so.

There is a definite relationship between fashion and stardom as each enhances the other. Richard Dyer agrees with the notion asserted by Francesco Alberoni that stars exist in a tripartite environment that consists of a.) "a large-scale society" where everyone feels like they "know" the star without the reverse being true, b.) "economic development above subsistence" and, as we have been discussing, c.) "social mobility."⁹² In regard to the fashion photograph, "every item a star wears in a fashion photograph becomes an element of his or her fashion image" as this is how stars are "able to create a signature look."⁹³ He continues quoting Alberoni when he says that

⁹¹ See Cindy McCreery's agreement with this position in McCreery 2004, 100.

⁹² Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI Publications, 1998), 7.

⁹³ Sill 2008, 136.

stars are unique as a “social phenomenon” because they do not “excite envy or resentment” even though they are members of a “privileged group.”⁹⁴ This is possibly why people seek to dress like them, as their wish for similarity stems not from jealousy, but from their knowledge that they can attain what is attainable of the stars image.

As with movie stars today, we are constantly told on magazines covers featuring famous celebrities that we, too, can “Get this look!” It is through eye-catching assertions such as this that consumers are led to believe without question that “fashion and notions of beauty (charm/glamour/sex appeal, etc.) [are] also to be shared by star and fan.”⁹⁵ Most recently, this phenomenon was seen in the mass purchasing of the dress that Kate Middleton bought from the British high street retailer Reiss roughly eighteen months previous to her wedding.⁹⁶ She was photographed wearing the dress in the official engagement portraits and the dress immediately sold out even after it was relaunched by the company (six times!) in order to keep up with the demand (which boiled down to internet sales clocking in at one dress sold per minute).⁹⁷ The printed medium now and then is a powerful force in influencing what is considered fashionable.

These images from the eighteenth century, served to send the message to the female populace that the luxury that was attached to this particular lifestyle could be theirs, without having to put up with the drama associated with such a life. Nelly’s image of her celebrity self, helped boost print sales, which in turn spread her sense of style across the capital and abroad. Her sartorial influence was certainly felt, thanks to the enhanced visual properties of mezzotints that made the images even more real and ripe for modeling oneself upon.

⁹⁴ Dyer 1998, 7.

⁹⁵ *ibid.* 38.

⁹⁶ CNN transcript, Reiss store founder David Reiss in an interview with Piers Morgan on *Piers Morgan Tonight*, 26 April 2011, accessed 28 April 2011, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1104/26/pmt.01.html>,

⁹⁷ *ibid.* and “Rush for Kate Middleton’s engagement outfit: Reiss dress now on sale in U.S but still sold out in Britain,” *The Daily Mail* (14 February 2011), accessed 23 May 2011, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1355144/Kate-Middletons-Reiss-engagement-dress-sale-US-sold-Britain.html>.

Chapter 3: Dally the Tall and The Female Pilot: Grace Elliott, Nancy Parsons, and Imagined Realism

Grace Dalrymple Elliott (c. 1754-1823, fig. 24) was the reigning woman of her peers beginning in 1781, and managed to maintain this reputation on both sides of the channel as she, over the course of the next five years, “continued to divide her time between London and France.”⁹⁸ She had been born in Scotland, but in 1771 married an English doctor who divorced her five years later after she was caught having an affair with an Irish peer, Arthur Annesley, eighth Viscount Valentia.⁹⁹ He evidently was not the first lover, as she had already acquired a reputation for being inconstant in her affections. This was to remain the case, as this affair did not last long and she soldiered on, carrying through two additional affairs before rising to fame in the early 1780s.¹⁰⁰ After choosing to move to France just before the Revolution, she escaped death despite her associations with the French nobility and, after a brief return to England (where she was not received warmly), she returned to the continent where she continued to be admired by a retinue of adoring Frenchmen.¹⁰¹ She died much later than most of the women in her profession, albeit it after a prolonged illness, approximately at the age of 69.¹⁰²

It is not remarked upon that she held particular sway over the prevailing fashions, as did some of her counterparts, but as she was such a striking and glittering figure during her brief reign in the spotlight of the London scene, it is hard to imagine that she could be anything but influential.¹⁰³ Her height and figure were repeatedly remarked upon, influencing her moniker of “Dally the Tall,” which even shows up in the margins as an identifier on the engraving of the print after Gainsborough’s full-length portrait (fig. 25, 1779). In her examination of the painting, art historian Christine Riding goes as far as to assert that the artist lengthened her limbs in order to further dramatize the effect of her height, though this is not necessarily the truth as the canvas is over two meters high and allows for plenty of room for an almost true-to-

⁹⁸ Martin J. Levy, “Elliott, Grace (1754?–1823),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 (online ed, May 2009), accessed 11 May 2011, <http://www04.sub.su.se:2164/view/article/8675>.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ See Horace Walpole’s comments from 19 June 1774. Quoted in Levy 2004 (Elliott entry).

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

¹⁰² *ibid.*

¹⁰³ See Levy 2004, Rosenthal et al. 2002, Frick Collection online catalogue entry (see below), among others.

life-sized portrayal of the subject.¹⁰⁴ It is true as Riding says, however, that her towering hairstyle—replete with thick sausage curls, ribbons, and powder—adds to the illusion of her fantastic length, but it also, in my opinion, serves as a monumental counter-balance to the imposing pyramidal form of her body.¹⁰⁵ Tall and statuesque, her painted form indeed resembles a classical statue from antiquity, as they are both static objects that seek to imitate natural poses and movement.

Gainsborough and Imagined Fabrics

During his time, Thomas Gainsborough was recognized not as only a popular society painter, but also as a favorite portraitist to women of scandalous repute who were ready to advance their fame as much as his. Curator Benedict Leca discussed the relationship between Gainsborough and his sitters, and went a step further by way of presenting him as a revolutionary figure of his time, namely that he strove to show women as being “empowered and skeptical of traditional gender roles” as the “ambitions of both sitter and painter made for a logical complicity in pushing up against prevailing codes of decorum that governed the painting of women and feminine manners.”¹⁰⁶ He concludes his introduction to Gainsborough’s motives by making the following revealing statement: “The maverick portraitist, in other words, would have common cause with a sitter who was a woman of renown [...] [and he] was specifically invested in projecting subversive femininities in complicity with the sitter.”¹⁰⁷ His statements here show Gainsborough in a particular light, one that takes the sentiments that were also applied to Reynolds, but pushes them a step further to that of feminist revolutionary of the mid- to late-eighteenth century.

While I do not agree completely with the above statements that herald Gainsborough as a revolutionary feminist, I do believe that he strove to set himself apart from his contemporaries by maintaining his commitment to his female sitters by remaining dedicated to realism and his unique painterly style. What sets Gainsborough’s portraits apart from these contemporaries (including Ramsay, Romney, and others) is his quick and sketchy brushstroke, which neglected to lavish minute details on the canvas, but instead worked against the notion that paintings

¹⁰⁴ Riding 2002, cat. 52.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Benedict Leca, “‘A Favorite Among the Demireps’,” in *Thomas Gainsborough and the Modern Woman*, ed. Benedict Leca et al. (London: D Giles Limited, 2010), 44.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.* 44, 45.

were attempts to present unwavering reproductions of nature. To this end, specific details in clothing are, when compared to his contemporaries that embraced a more linear brushstroke, more generalized and less journalistic as they otherwise could have been.

With Gainsborough, he leaves nothing out when he paints clothing, and he is successful in conveying the colors and texture of the fabric.¹⁰⁸ It was the artist's intent not to produce clearly definable drapery, as he specified that his portraits be hung at a certain level and viewed from a proper distance in order to ensure that the "illusion" that he wished to create would be visible, i.e. where the "brushwork dissolved into satin fabric."¹⁰⁹ It was this need for illusion and imagination, along with his manner of embracing naturalism and rejecting the artificial that distinguished Gainsborough's work further from his contemporaries. It is important to note that his specifications deal with the attention given to the fabrics in his pictures. It is no wonder, as he repeatedly pays specific attention to making his sitters look fashionable in their own dress.

Between Two Worlds

As opposed to many of the other pictures of courtesans painted by the sheer volition of the artist, this portrait was commissioned by Mrs. Elliott's then long-time lover George James Cholmondeley, fourth Earl of Cholmondeley.¹¹⁰ She is captured on canvas mid-stride, the outline of her moving limbs visible on the fabric of her cream-colored petticoat. She wears a closed bodice dress made from shimmering and warm golden yellow silk with lace edging around the neckline. Lace florets accent the scalloping of the cuffs and trimmed edges of the open skirt, adding elegance to the otherwise simple, yet striking, garment. Strings of pearls accent the scalloped sleeve openings and are partially obscured by the gauzy mass of what appears to be linen

¹⁰⁸ The results are often stunning, as seen in the portraits of Lady Alston (Louvre, Paris) and Countess Alston (Iveagh Bequest, Kenwood House), figs. 29 and 30.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.* 44.

¹¹⁰ Levy 2004 (Elliott entry). The painting was paid for in full and remained in the possession of the Cholmondeley family for several generations (see Metropolitan Museum of Art's online catalogue entry). Many of the paintings of courtesans were partially paid for, but often not fully paid for due to the secession of relationships, which in turn caused the painter to be able to hold on to the image for much longer in his studio (Martin Postle, "'Painted Women': Reynolds and the Cult of the Courtesan," in *Notorious Muse: The Actress in British Art and Culture, 1776-1812*, ed. Robyn Asleson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 44). It is safe to assume that this was often how many of this type of portrait came to either become or remain showpieces.

engageantes. The otherwise plain petticoat has an embroidered flounce edging the bottom, which draws the eye to the hem, and in turn to her exposed shoes and foot. The creamy, satiny off-white of the underskirt is reminiscent of the silvery hues seen mostly in the court dress of the 1760s and 70s, and further aligns the portrait to a more elevated past, one that the Mrs. Elliott was privy to only by way of the company that she kept (i.e. peers and politicians).¹¹¹

Her dress has been described as not being period, but instead that which harkens back to the age of Van Dyck and Lely, and thus reliving the “hedonism of the Restoration court.”¹¹² I differ slightly as it seems that the dress follows the line of change in style that came to dresses in the last years of the 1770s, and eventually developed into the iconic look of the 1780s, i.e. a departure from the heavily decorated gown with an open bodice and stomacher, but instead a closed, front fastening bodice with an open skirt that displayed more of the petticoat. While it is still not a strict representation of the dress of the times, I do believe that it’s due to the deeply rectangular neckline and high, scalloped cuffs that the costume straddles the two centuries.¹¹³ She doesn’t wear the typical accessories of her time, but instead sports simplified, more discreet versions of them. These include less obvious pearl bracelets, which almost seem to blend in with her natural skin tone, and a thin black ribbon that ties at the neck and falls down the center of her bosom where her left hand is clutching a large swath of fabric to her heart (fig. 26).

Other artists employ this thin ribbon as a choker/necklace in portraits as well, as it appears to have been a popular accessory sported by women from the mid-century mark and on. On this thinner ribbon, there is usually something attached to bottom of the dangling thread, often times a small crucifix (jeweled or otherwise) or a pearl (as in the case of Reynolds’s portrait of Mary Hickey from 1770, fig. 27). Visually, it is similar to the solitaires worn by men, which were essentially the ribbon ties from their bag-wigs that they tied forward around their necks (in a way, a

¹¹¹ See Reynolds’s portrait of Lady Elizabeth Keppel attired as a bridesmaid for the wedding of Queen Charlotte and King George III, (1761, presently at Woburn Abbey; Mannings catalogue entry 1052).

¹¹² Riding 2002, cat. 52.

¹¹³ Or, more accurately, it straddles the two ways of representing dress, as this style of dress falls under the category of the “careless” fancy dress that Van Dyck and his followers propagated. It is also interesting to note that Gainsborough famously was against such depictions of women in period dress, as was championed by his rival Reynolds. See discussion on this particular Gainsborough versus Reynolds issue in Leca 2010, 66-67.

precursor to the neck/bowtie, fig. 28).¹¹⁴ The lady's thin band has an aura of refinement that the thicker band lacks (see fig. 30), and it goes well with the simplicity of Mrs. Elliott's gown. This juxtaposition with the ambiguously fancy-dress-cum-period-dress makes for an interesting interaction with all the different fashionable components, making it more plausible that she has a foot in both the fictive and the real worlds.

This gesture of holding her hand to her chest was rooted in the popular philosophy of sentimentality, as her outward gestures denoted the inner sentiments and "agitations of the soul."¹¹⁵ The "inner agitations" in this case were surely to be left to the viewer's imagination, and in this capacity they were participating in a telling dialogue with the subject. The animation that the critics spoke of when describing this picture at its premiere at the 1778 exhibition was not only physical (her walking motion), but also emotional, thus creating an "alternative narrative" to be deciphered by the public.¹¹⁶ This focus on her chest, however, with the dangling tails of the necklace meeting at her low neckline, and the placement of her hand, draws the eye to the more sensual areas of her body. Even though she refrains from revealing even portions of her body which could be, in the right setting of classical antiquity (which is not the case here), excused on such grounds, the riveting sexuality present in this striking portrait characterizes Mrs. Elliott without a doubt as one belonging to her profession. Although, if another woman of aristocratic heritage with the same characteristic symbols would have been in her place, the interpreted meaning would be remarkably different. She would probably not be read as being a prostitute (especially in light of the sentimental symbolism that is discussed above).

What is key here is the identification of the sitter, as the general public *knew* that this was a portrait of Elliott; there was no doubt in recognizing her face, especially in light of comments praising Gainsborough's ability to accurately capture facial likenesses. In light of this, especially as Gainsborough was an outspoken advocate for realism in all capacities, it is safe to assume that this conflation of period dress with seventeenth-century fantasy was conceived with the express intention of noiselessly underscoring the identity of Mrs. Elliott.

¹¹⁴ Avril Hart, *Ties* (London: V&A Publications, 1998), 29-31.

¹¹⁵ Leca 2010, 105.

¹¹⁶ Leca uses this term to describe the use of narrative that set Gainsborough apart from Reynolds. Read more in Leca 2010, 57.

The Unpopular Reception of the Second Portrait (1782)

Although her facial expression is demure, the glow of color in her cheeks gave rise to commentary by the critics, though on this occasion some were definitively less malicious. One such critic only stated that the artist's choice of coloring "gives the face a foreign air, and reminds the spectator of the Paris Ladies, whose rubicundity of cheek is derived from art."¹¹⁷ This comment seems to purposely steer away from the usual comments about overly-rouged cheeks, and instead couches the aesthetic detail in terms of high art and elevated cultivation.¹¹⁸ As she had also spent much time in Paris, it is probable that this was also an attempt to submit some kind of visual proof of her bringing back some sort of fashion and stylistic influence back from the continent.

Mrs. Elliott sat again for Gainsborough in 1782 and he created this oval bust-length portrait that he also exhibited that year (fig. 31). By this time, she had left the protection of the Earl of Cholmondeley and was now under the aegis of the Prince of Wales, and had just given birth to his child.¹¹⁹ In this picture, she wears a light colored pastel dress with a floral pattern and low décolletage. A strong golden line of piping runs down the side of each of the sleeves. Again, she wears a thin black ribbon choker around her neck that is, this time, tied under her chin in a bow with the tails extending down her chest, which again boosts the sensuality of the image. Here it appears to be pinned at the center of the neckline of the bodice, situated just above a dark blue, jeweled medallion that I believe is a miniature.¹²⁰ It is incredibly difficult to discern the individual characteristics of her dress aside from the obvious details, even though here it would be the perfect place to display specific sartorial details due to the heightened sense of intimacy the viewer feels with the sitter.

What is most prominently on display here, however, is the miniature attached to the large, pale pink bow at her bosom (fig. 33). Miniatures were small portraits in varying degrees of diminutive size that were designed to be portable and singularly

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Riding 2002, cat. 52.

¹¹⁸ Mrs. Elliott was not spared negative criticism concerning her blushing cheeks when the second picture of her by Gainsborough was exhibited four years later. See upcoming discussion in "Cosmetics and Morality" (47).

¹¹⁹ "Grace Dalrymple Elliott," The Frick Collection Online Collections Database, accessed 12 May 2011, [http://collections.frick.org/Obj859\\$2163](http://collections.frick.org/Obj859$2163).

¹²⁰ For the sake of my argument, and since the brushstroke makes it decidedly unclear one way or another, I will continue henceforth to refer to this piece of jewelry as a miniature.

worn as jewelry.¹²¹ Jewelry's, as Marcia Pointon quotes Georg Simmel as saying, "whole significance [...]" is grounded in "the need to attract the attention of others."¹²² The significance of this miniature continues to coincide with her opinion that "jewelry is thus significant for its owner only indirectly, that is, as relational to other people."¹²³ Miniatures, with their combination of portraiture, jewelry, and container, were valuable objects of luxurious status, that despite losing some of their exclusivity as the century worn on, still were regarded as luxury objects due to their multifaceted function (fig. 49).¹²⁴

This painting of Mrs. Elliott, with its oval setting and socially-upsetting sitter, harkens back to another picture painted earlier in the century. François Boucher's portrait of Madame de Pompadour (fig. 32), the mistress of French king Louis XV, is admittedly different many ways, but at the same time it possesses clear parallels to Elliott's picture. Status of mistress aside, Jeanne is shown elegantly dressed at her toilette, and stares directly at the viewer in a similar fashion. On her right arm is a miniature/cameo of her lover, the king, on a multi-tiered pearled wristband (fig. 34), prominently turned to face the viewer and serving to further cement her status and proximity to the highest ranked official in all France. She wears a cape around her shoulders to keep her dress from getting powder on it, and the triangle that it makes with her low neckline draws the eye to her bare décolletage, similar to that of Mrs. Elliott. Gainsborough here makes a not-so-subtle comparison with the reigning Queen of the Courtesans to the almost-Queen of France through the inclusion and emphasis on accessories.

Cosmetics and Morality

Even though this portrait was ill-received at the 1782 Royal Academy exhibition ("the hair was criticized, and Mrs. Elliott's high coloring and expression were said to denote her calling"), the press it received may have heightened its visibility due to the fascination and curiosity of those who were willing to pay to see it (and by extension,

¹²¹ For a full discussion on the role of miniatures as jewelry, see Marcia Pointon, "Surrounded with Brilliants': Miniature Portraits in Eighteenth-Century England," *Art Bulletin*. vol. 83, no. 1 (2001): 48-71.

¹²² Pointon 2001, 68.

¹²³ *ibid.* 68.

¹²⁴ *ibid.* 54, 55.

possess).¹²⁵ The issue of whether or not makeup truly signified a woman of ill repute is clearly documented in texts of the time, but when it comes to artistic representation, it is harder to differentiate. Apart from the French artists of Nattier and Boucher, who did not fail to brush the cheeks of any of their female subjects with bright red rouge, English artists painted their sitters with, by today's standards, barely noticeable blush. Cosmetics were a hot topic during much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as wearing it was considered a vice not fit for moral women of class and substance.¹²⁶ "French rouge," in particular, was described as being "the tool of the devil at work in society" as makeup signified all the unrighteous characteristics of an immoral woman, namely "vanity, pride, and duplicity."¹²⁷

Duplicity and deceit seemed to be one of the more heinous offenses, as women being able to try and disguise themselves as being something other than what they were was considered irreprehensible.¹²⁸ This, coupled with the long-time association of cosmetics with prostitutes (i.e. "those who used make-up to enhance their sexual power"), was decried by writers, but that is not to say that society women let these admonishments keep them from powdering their faces and employing face patches.¹²⁹ The fact that there was such a continued and vocal outcry against the use of such products attests to its enduring popularity among all levels of persons. Therefore, the comments dealt out by the exhibition critics must have surely been a jibe that was meant to critically underscore the visible personality of the sitter, which again was no secret, regardless of the amount of coloring present on the canvas (which was no more, in my opinion, than was seen in the 1778 portrait where her rouge was praised instead of censured). The association of rouge with France, and by extension Elliott's association with France, by the time this portrait was painted in the 1780s speaks to a shift in sentiment towards French fashion. Regardless of politics, it always seemed to be admired, but these new attitudes could be due to the heightened political tensions on the continent, as they were only a few years away from revolution.

¹²⁵ Quote from "Grace Dalrymple Elliott" (The Frick Collection Collections Catalogue entry).

¹²⁶ Caroline Palmer, "Brazen Cheek: Face-Painters in Late Eighteenth-Century England," *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2008): 198.

¹²⁷ *ibid.* 198.

¹²⁸ *ibid.* 198.

¹²⁹ *ibid.* 199.

As far as her hairstyle is concerned, it is more curious as to why critics responded the way they did, as hers was in keeping with the popular styles of the day, sported by not only trendsetting actresses like Mary “Perdita” Robinson (an “actress-cum-courtesan,” fig. 36), the matronly Sarah Siddons (star of Drury Lane, fig. 37) but also Georgiana Spencer in her later years (fig. 38).¹³⁰ Possibly this sample of women (actresses, albeit popular ones, and the ever-scandal-inducing Duchess of Devonshire) is indicative of why the response was so negative, as Elliott was seen to resemble women whose moral standing, in these cases, could be easily questioned. On the other hand, respectable, largely scandal free women also enjoyed the liberty of wearing their hair in this way, as seen (among others) in the portrait of Mrs. Bryan Cooke by George Romney (fig. 39). Cooke was the wife of a respected general, but also became a philanthropist in her own right who championed the cause of education for the poor.¹³¹

“The Female Pilot”: Nancy Parsons, the Political Mistress

Gainsborough also painted a portrait of the politically influential courtesan Nancy Parsons, née Anne Parsons, later Viscountess Maynard (c. 1735-1814/15), in a similar fashion to Mrs. Elliott’s later picture (fig. 40, date unknown), but from a slightly wider angle. It is visible that she is sitting in a chair, perhaps in a parlor, with a long sleeved (to the wrists!) closed front bodice decorated with fly-fringe and tassels, while her neck is covered with a lacy fichu. Her hair is decorated with a scarf with a jewel on the end, which could be read as a subtle reference to the oriental styles that she chose to be portrayed in two other portraits by different artists.¹³² What is radically different from the oval portrait of Mrs. Elliott is the way that the gaze of the sitter is not focused on the viewer, but she instead sits in a demure and almost chaste manner that in no way belies her occupation or station in life.

The prostitute is, in a way, understood as being in some sort of state of undress by default, but with this image in particular, it seems like she as a courtesan is more covered than the average sitter. There is a resolute feeling of “buttoning up” present, and that access is strictly controlled by Parsons, with the rest of her body denying the

¹³⁰ Popular hairstyles were also illustrated in women’s magazines. See fig. 35.

¹³¹ “Mrs. Bryan Cooke,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, accessed on 24 May 2011, <http://tinyurl.com/3zg957s>.

¹³² See argument in the following section, “The Courtesan in the Imagined Orient.”

visual control asserted by those who purchased her image: she doles out only a “carefully calculated portion of herself.”¹³³ It is hard to judge the extent of the full visual impact that this painting could have had on viewers, as the original is no longer around. Though the details are still clear, the small size of the mezzotint that was engraved after the original subtracts from any benefit the clarity may have given. It is to be sure that her image was just as sought out as the reset, as she was a person of extreme interest for Londoners of the 1760s.

The Courtesan in the Imagined Orient

Both Reynolds and Scottish portraitist George Willison painted Nancy in so-called “oriental” dress (see figs. 41 and 42a).¹³⁴ This style of dress was popular among European ladies of higher rank and station, which drew inspiration from what they imagined to be rooted in the actual fashion of dressing from Asia Minor and the Middle East. Many women (and men) were painted wearing such costumes, but elements of the oriental style also permeated everyday dress, mainly in the form of accessories such as turbans and ostrich feathers. Willison’s portrait dates from 1771, and James Watson (who engraved many pictures for Reynolds) produced a mezzotint after it during the same year (fig. 42b).¹³⁵

In his portrait, the artist shows Parsons reclining on a sofa, her right arm propped comfortably on a sumptuously plush velour pillow, and dressed from head to toe in clothing from the “Levant” (or the eastern part of the Mediterranean).¹³⁶ Items that serve to further situate her within an eastern milieu, namely the colorful rug and tapestry that covers the back of the low-sitting, divan, surround her. Her costume consists of a dress that seems to be made up of two main parts: a robe and under dress, with a metal-accented red cloth belt accentuating her waist. The robe seems to be made of a pearly gray satin-like material, and features a very low, blue bordered,

¹³³ See Postle 2003, 29.

¹³⁴ Reynolds’s c. 1767-1770 portrait of Parsons is identified as ‘Mrs. Horton,’ Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the dress in George Willison’s c. 1771 portrait (Yale Center for British Art, New Haven) more directly echoes the pastels of western women in oriental dress (fig. 42a) by Jean-Étienne Liotard from the 1740s (see Liotard’s *Portrait of Mary Gunning, Countess of Coventry*, 1749, [Rijksmuseum, NL] for what seems to be the basis for this painting, fig. 43a). More in depth discussion follows.

¹³⁵ The print differs only slightly, besides being in the reverse, the main difference being that the hairstyle is more clearly rendered, as is the long decorative stripe that goes down the length of the fabric of her skirt.

¹³⁶ I assume this based on the similarities with Liotard’s portrait (fig. 43), but Mannings identifies her clothing as being “Turkish” in origin (Mannings and Postle 2006, 264).

U-shaped neckline that, in turn, exposes the less revealing dress of off-white, matte fabric. Her sleeves are turned up to reveal the goldenrod silky fabric on the underside, and the flowing cuffs of the under dress show through, very much so in the same manner as the ruffled cuffs of a *robe à l'anglaise*. On her head, she wears a black and red turban that also features a matching goldenrod fabric section of drapery that covers her neck. Similar to the one that she wears in Reynolds's portrait (fig. 41), the turban completes her transformation into a woman of the "Orient." The omission of the usual telltale European details (i.e. powdered wigs, or panniers) to further mark her as being otherwise. Here, as well, the function of the mezzotint as a method for more clearly rendering the more subtle details of paintings, is evident as in the Watson print, as her hair is shown to be braided and looped around the headpiece in an intricate, "exotic" hairstyle.¹³⁷

The fact that Parsons repeatedly chose this oriental style to be painted in is curious, but it can suggest that she wanted to be shown in a way that glamorously portrays her occupation. Her amorous hopscotching from one nobleman/politician to another was noticed and remarked upon, with one observer calling her "the Duke of Grafton's Mrs Haughton [*sic*], the Duke of Dorset's Mrs Haughton, everybody's Mrs Haughton."¹³⁸ Although paintings of exoticized (and eroticized) women in seraglios are mainly noted for being a convention of the nineteenth-century (and a particularly French obsession), they were also present during the previous century all over Europe. Popular literature, music, and plays all spoke of women within the area of the harem, and this comparison of the wealthy mistress of an opulent Eastern sultan was surely made with Nancy's characterization as a calculating political mistress.¹³⁹

One can ask, however, how she felt that these paintings would advance her image as a woman of fashion, as she most likely meant to not only capitalize on her reputation as a courtesan, but also as a style icon. However, since portraits like these

¹³⁷ I was not able to see the original painting up close, nor did I manage to find a high-quality digital image. In the image that I was able to secure, the turban appears to be completely fabric and does not include the detail of the wrapped hair. The paint is dark, however, so it is totally possible that this detail is indeed present, but just not readily apparent.

¹³⁸ Horace Walpole's *Correspondences*, xxiii, 344. Quoted in Mannings and Postle 2006, 264. "Mrs Haughton" (actually Horton) is a reference the name that she assumed upon her return to England in 1760 (see information in the following section, "Beginnings and Continued Political Machinations").

¹³⁹ W. A. Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (1782) is a prime example of women in harems seeking rescue. A. Vivaldi's *Bajazet* (1735), G. F. Handel's *Serse* (1738) and the French author Montisquieu's *Persian Letters* (1721) are other examples illustrating the European's heightened interest in the Orient during this time period.

were first and foremost status symbols for members of the upper crust of society, it could be that she was simultaneously aligning herself with that set, while still highlighting her outsider status. Ordinary aristocratic women were frequently portrayed in similar ways, from Reynolds's portrait of Mrs. Baldwin in her extraordinary "Persian" dress (1782, fig. 43b.), to Liotard's repeated portraits of women wearing this exact same dress from the Levant from the 1740s (fig. 43a.). This shows that the association of women being portrayed within the closed setting of what could be interpreted as being a seraglio was not explicitly related to prostitution. In Nancy's case, however, she seeks to highlight the opposite by repeatedly showing herself as such. The dualism of such tropes of morality surely made her image even more alluring and sought after for repetition.

Beginnings and Continued Political Machinations

At the beginning of her career she had worked on the stage, though it was as an opera extra, and not an actress in the theatre, as was the case with most of her counterparts.¹⁴⁰ She seems to have supplemented her income quite heavily through her side occupation as a prostitute.¹⁴¹ After a sojourn in the West Indies with a slaver named Horton (whom she may or may not have married), she returned to England in 1760 and picked up where she left off.¹⁴² She seems to have suffered a dip in popularity, as evidenced by Horace Walpole (the eighteenth-century British commentator on almost every that was fashionable or of interest) remarking that she was "one of the commonest creatures in London, once much liked, but out of date."¹⁴³ It was not long before she recovered from this lack of interest, for she soon began cultivating relationships with members of the peerage and the government, eventually becoming the mistress of the Duke of Grafton, who at the time was heavily involved in politics. He soon rose to the rank of secretary of state, then first minister, and finally—ultimately—(just after the end of their liaison) prime minister.¹⁴⁴

Theirs was a relationship much discussed in the papers, due to two factors: firstly, she seemed to be a highly influential person in the duke's political life due to

¹⁴⁰ Hanham 2005.

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*

¹⁴² *ibid.*

¹⁴³ Walpole's *Correspondences*, xxxviii, 435. Quoted in Mannings and Postle 2006, 264.

Citation dates from 27 August 1764, so this was before forming the attachment with the Duke of Grafton that was to make her a household name.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*

the friendships she cultivated with many key politicians, and secondly, there was growing speculation that the duke would leave his wife and make Parsons the next Duchess of Grafton. The pair was even featured in at least one so-called *tête-à-tête* column in the popular *Town and Country Magazine*. This gossip column (officially named “Histories of the Tête-à-Tête annexed: or Memoirs of ...”) had a popular run from 1769 to 1792, where it included satirical takes on the top stories currently running through the rumor mill.¹⁴⁵ Featuring two portraits of the couple involved (usually well-known figures in London society) encased in oval frames situated like pendants (hence the origin of the name “*tête-à-tête*”) it also included an “article or ‘history’ of the heroine’s and/or hero’s romantic and sexual history.”¹⁴⁶ Parson and the Duke of Grafton’s own *tête-à-tête* was one of the first published sets in *Town and Country*, theirs being published in March 1769 (fig. 44).¹⁴⁷

In her oval portrait, she is shown wearing fashionable clothing of the time, including an embellished stomacher, choker, and a small, lace cap on her head. Her hair is not piled high and her face bears a resemblance to her other portraits. She faces the viewer head-on, while the Duke sits in profile, also dressed well, but with remarkably fewer other identifying details. The portraits had to be more or less representative of the subjects, as the subtitles rarely contained full names, but usually made use of witty monikers that described the couple in question.¹⁴⁸ In this case, Nancy is nicknamed “The Female Pilot” and he “A Prime Minister,” (even though he had not yet achieved that post) and her role in his life is shown as a propelling him towards his political destiny. Her pushing him towards a career decision that he possibly did not want, as well as being active in cultivating political relationships for his sake is made completely blatant.¹⁴⁹

Rumors arose that his attachment to her was keeping him from properly performing his duties to the crown, and that was only inflamed when he chose her to accompany him to the opera on the same evening that Queen Charlotte was in the

¹⁴⁵ Cindy McCreery, “Keeping Up with the *Bon Ton*: The *Tête-à-Tête* Series in the *Town and Country Magazine*,” in *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England: Roles, Representations, and Responsibilities*, ed. Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (London: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997), 208.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.* 208.

¹⁴⁷ McCreery 2004, 92.

¹⁴⁸ I came to this conclusion this based on visual analysis of several different examples in this series, as sometimes names were partially disguised with omitted letters and dashes (see fig. 45).

¹⁴⁹ See Hanham 2005.

theatre, which resulted in an editorial “furor” in the press.¹⁵⁰ All cause for concern passed quickly enough as Nancy was caught in a side relationship with the much younger third Duke of Dorset and subsequently thrown off by Grafton.¹⁵¹ Her following relationships resulted in a marriage and numerous affairs, and even though she moved abroad and never returned to England, she still managed to remain in the papers until her death, albeit with increasingly shorter reports.¹⁵²

It can safely be said that Gainsborough paid varying degrees of attention to the clothing that his female sitters wore, but sought to display them in a way that was indicative of their public personas. As the years of the century drew closer to a close, popular acceptance of scandalous behavior began to decline and these portraits were crafted with different audiences in mind. It was still the audience that wanted so voraciously to see, know, and emulate all that was in the now and on the front page of the press, but the growing sentiments of morality meant that they would be well-pleased with pictures of these popular beauties, but with less obvious overtones to their current states. Both Elliott and Parsons were scandal makers in their own rights, but they certainly chose to be portrayed in striking clothing that enhanced their already widespread appeal.

Chapter 4: “This Priestess of Fashion”: Fame, Fashion, and Mrs. Abington as the Actress-cum-Courtesan

Frances Abington (1737-1815) was one of the eighteenth century’s biggest stars of the stage, delighting crowds for thirty years with her portrayals of iconic characters in comic roles. Mrs. Abington, as she was called even though she had been separated from her husband very soon after their marriage, was the epitome of the fashionable star who had it all. I am choosing to include her in my study because she is identified by some sources as an “actress-cum-courtesan,” although her contemporary biographers sought to downplay any sort of scandalous past (or present,

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, also the following excerpt in McCreery 2004, 93: “It is not that he kept a mistress at home, but that he constantly attended her abroad.—It is not the private indulgence, but the public insult, of which I complain. The name of Miss Parsons would hardly have been known if the first lord of the treasury had not led her in triumph through the opera-house, even in the presence of the queen. When we see a man act in this manner we may admit the shameless depravity of his heart, but what are we to think of his understanding?” stated by Junius, “the famously anonymous critic who savaged the Grafton administration in a series of letters to the *Public Advertiser* beginning in 1769.”

¹⁵¹ *ibid.* 93.

¹⁵² *ibid.* 93.

for that matter), emphasizing that “in private life [she] deserves no small praise for the unobtrusive manner and general propriety of her conduct.”¹⁵³ I would like to explore the special case of actresses where, unlike others with less-than-intact reputations, they were accorded social mobility based on the basis of their presumed “cultivation of character.”¹⁵⁴ I understand this “cultivation” to be a process of social and personal refinement that makes up for the defaults in character or position one was born with. This interesting phenomenon is vital to this thesis as this was a milieu where courtesans could achieve a greater degree of social mobility and acceptance. In this chapter, I will ask how was Mrs. Abington able to become accepted by so many, despite her less than scandal-free past? Is it because of her fame as both an actress and woman of “loose morals” that she became this overwhelmingly popular fashion icon and trendsetter of British society?

After an unsuccessful start in London around the mid-century mark, Abington made the move to the Irish stage, debuting in Dublin in 1759 where she almost immediately became the belle of the who’s who of society.¹⁵⁵ The stage provided the perfect platform for disseminating fashion, even more so at this time when the theatre companies gave actresses allowances to buy their own clothes, thus the choice of what constituted a costume was one carefully used by the actress to her benefit.¹⁵⁶ Here we can see an illustration of the concepts brought up in chapter two regarding the purchasing of clothing based on previous celebrity consumption. This is most clearly seen very early on in Abington’s career through the popularity of the “Abington Cap,” which was first worn by the actress on stage in Dublin.¹⁵⁷

The hat continued to be associated with her even into the mid-1770s, where she is shown wearing a version of it in the portrait by Thomas Hickey, *Mrs. Abington as Lady Bab Lardoon in ‘The Maid of the Oaks’* (1775). While this portrait was not painted at the exact time that the item was first deemed a “must-have” and was

¹⁵³ Gill Perry, “Ambiguity and Desire: Metaphors of Sexuality in Late Eighteenth-Century representation of the Actress,” in *Notorious Muse: The Actress in British Art and Culture, 1776-1812*, ed. Robyn Asleson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 64. Martin Postle coins the term “courtesan-cum-actress” but I use the reverse of that term for it is more apt for my purposes (Postle 2003, 46).

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Alison Oddey, “Abington, Frances (1737–1815),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, accessed 11 May 2011, <http://www04.sub.su.se:2164/view/article/51>.

¹⁵⁶ For studio allowances for actresses, see Oddey 2004: “On 5 May 1775 they signed an agreement, granting her a weekly salary of £12 and an annual clothing allowance of £60[.]”

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.*

therefore not influential in its initial success as a fashionable accessory, it does not discount the fact that the stage played its own role beside that of the portrait in influencing the fashionable tastes of society. The fact that this hat still appears in a painting fifteen years after the first success of the accessory testifies to the endurance of fashion in direct relation to the continuing fashionability of the person in question.

Actress = Prostitute? Actress-cum-Courtesans and Social Mobility

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the distinction between actresses and prostitutes was not always clear. Some considered them as being virtually equivalent, due to the way they supported themselves by effectively being visible and available (in different ways) to the public.¹⁵⁸ One author from the 1720s made the comparison of the stage with “the window of a toyshop, through which actresses could be seen and purchased.”¹⁵⁹ Similarly, actresses and courtesans both had the opportunity to be understood outside of their sphere, notably as someone from a higher social stratum. Unlike actresses, courtesans were always understood as being higher than their counterparts, but yet never really quitting their sphere until they left the profession all together. As an actress, the courtesan could be seen as cementing preconceptions, but also, alternatively this move could show her transcending of her low social origins, depending on the parts she played. Many of London’s most dazzling courtesans began their careers on stage (like Nancy Parsons), or took up acting at while working as a courtesan, as was the case with Mrs. Armistead, a celebrated courtesan of the 1780s and 90s (later devoted wife of Whig politician Charles James Fox).

Some of the factors that led to this upward movement by actresses included not only associating with men and women of social clout (such as members of the aristocracy and politicians), but also their ability to mimic their manners and behaviors onstage. This in turn made their crafted personas feel to the audience as if they were corporeally embodied.¹⁶⁰ Since successful actresses and courtesans like Mrs. Abington were often independent women of means, they were able to afford the clothing, jewelry, and property that their audience members were also seen to enjoy;

¹⁵⁸ Kimberly Crouch, “The Public Life of Actresses: Prostitutes or Ladies?” in *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England: Roles, Representations, and Responsibilities*, Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (eds.) (London: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997), 58.

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.* 61.

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.* 61.

this was a confirmation that “actresses could mirror the social and economic life of the upper classes.”¹⁶¹

Conversely, the way that the actress was able to play the role of the common whore made her mobility even more accepted, as her chameleon status was seen as something that was not relegated to only one sphere, but readily transitory and able to rest in one area over another. Playing the prostitute ensured success over a broader segment of the population, but as successful actresses chose to play the part of the aristocratic woman even off stage in their public lives (like, for example, Sarah Siddons), their assumed personas were more believable by those they interacted with on and off-stage. As Kimberly Crouch asserts, “by presenting herself as having aristocratic qualities, sympathies and inclinations in both public and private, an actress might inspire emulation.”¹⁶² It is in this way that I believe that fashion trends were accepted by the London masses as it was transmitted from the stage.

This understanding of the actress as a vice-ridden individual began during the Restoration era (1660-88) and bled over into the eighteenth century, where it was to persist throughout the century. That is not to say, however, that it remained unquestioned: the paradigm was breaking down even in the 1720s.¹⁶³ Any kind of attention, both positive and negative, was seen as good for the popularity of the actress, as it generated buzz that in turn meant that she was more visible to those who might not already be familiar with her.¹⁶⁴ The beauty of the actress, and by extension her choice of clothing and fashionability, was something that was universally acknowledged by both negative and positive critics.

The general freedom to wear whatever clothing best suited the individual actress’s own taste was due greatly to the lack of concern over the period accuracy of stage costumes. Critics commented on such discrepancies, stating that “chambermaids who were dressed as duchesses served to weaken the effects of drama” and that a certain actresses ““forgot their engagement on stage and dress’d for a card party.””¹⁶⁵ This disregard for authenticity of dress while on stage furthered the fame of the actress who could use clothing as a trademark, or something to readily advance their

¹⁶¹ *ibid.* 61.

¹⁶² *ibid.* 59.

¹⁶³ *ibid.* 61.

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.* 66.

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.* 71. Second citation quoted from the *Public Advertiser*, 4 October 1782 in Crouch 1997, 71.

celebrity by positive association with certain objects. As with today's celebrities who are also known for their acute fashion taste and ability to become trendsetters, actresses of the eighteenth century could "revaluate or devalue fashion, depending on their fashion image and how this interacts with the clothes that they wear."¹⁶⁶

Mrs. Abington as Courtesan and Actress: Pictorial Representations

Early during her time spent in the ranks of England's finest courtesans, Mrs. Abington was the mistress of a certain Mr. Needham, who was a Member of Parliament in Ireland.¹⁶⁷ They met early into her stay in Dublin and after his untimely death in 1765, she became the recipient of a substantial purse that allowed her to live comfortably in several residences upon her return to London.¹⁶⁸ This monetary comfort did not prevent her from seeking new lovers for both company and monetary compensation. It is interestingly remarked by literary historian Gillen D'Arcy Wollen about the switching of gender roles that the comic actress employed, namely that

[...] Mrs. Abington effectively reversed the terms of sexual exchange of her youth. She now "kept" men in addition to being kept, and visited houses according to whim, as a gentleman might take his choice of bordellos.¹⁶⁹

The dazzling attractiveness of Mrs. Abington's clothing is fully recognizable in her portrait by Reynolds from 1771 (fig. 47) where she is supposedly in character as Miss Prue from the comedic play *Love for Love*. She is shown seated, with the back of the carved wooden slat of the Chippendale chair to us, and the empty spaces between the it and the frame allows us to glimpse the details of her bodice from an unconventional perspective. Although other artists of his time and before frequently employed this unusual pose, it was not applied by Reynolds to any other female sitter. Frans Hals (1582/1583 – 1666) was one of the first artists to employ this compositional method and apply it to his portraits of upper-class male sitters (fig. 46), although his sitters are not turned as completely towards the viewer as Mrs.

¹⁶⁶ Sill 2008, 137.

¹⁶⁷ Philip H. Highfill et al., *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800. Volume 1, Abaco to Belfille* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), 14.

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.* 14.

¹⁶⁹ Gillen D'ArcyWood, *The Shock of the Real: Romanticism and Visual Culture, 1760-1860* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 60.

Abington.¹⁷⁰ Although Reynolds was directly and heavily influenced by Netherlandish art, a more recent painting was surely an inspiration for this pose. While in Italy in 1764, Angelica Kauffmann painted the legendary thespian, playwright, and director of the Drury Lane Theater, David Garrick (fig. 48). Garrick was effectively Abington's employer, as well as fellow actor, and she was oftentimes compared with him, as they both possessed an "ability to *be* rather than merely perform a role."¹⁷¹

It is possible that Reynolds sought to draw a line of connection between the two due to their shared fame and association, which is a significant detail due to the subtle coding of images that separated the way men and women were represented.¹⁷² It could also be a subtle personification of the rivalry between the two thespians, as Garrick was known to be jealous of the fame of his female counterparts, as well as competitive in his own right.¹⁷³

Garrick's pose certainly has nothing of the coquette that runs rampant through Abington's, but he appears serious and focused, as a man of many responsibilities was expected to look. In the manner of Caravaggio, his face emerges dramatically from the shadows and is illuminated only by a light from an unknown source.¹⁷⁴ He grips the top rung of the back of, by comparison, a rather simple ladder back chair, his right hand fully enclosing the rounded top knob of the turned woodwork side. He wears a frock coat of a solid, deep wine color that features large, turned cuffs with buttons of the same color. White cuffs modestly poke out from the sleeves, and his barely discernable lace jabot at his neck makes no great effort to be seen. A brief survey of Kauffmann's work clearly shows that she was not one to overly emphasize the

¹⁷⁰ Also see mention of this possible influence in Mannings and Postle 2000, 56.

¹⁷¹ D'Arcy Wood 2001, 61.

¹⁷² See "Competition with Garrick" in Felicity A. Nussbaum, *Rival Queens* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010) 258-64. I came to the same conclusions that she did, but before consulting her text. Her chapter affirms my position.

¹⁷³ Nussbaum 2010, 261-264.

¹⁷⁴ This portrayal in dramatic lighting harkens back to the technique used by the Old Masters in history painting, which further draws parallels with an enlightened, creative past (West 2004, 169). Women, who were only thought capable of imitating and not creating art, were instead shown as being only beautiful creatures (ibid. 145). This is, of course, complicated by the fact that the artist here is a woman, but this discussion is not pertinent to my arguments. For a further explanation of beauty in this context, see my previous statements in chapter two of this thesis.

sartorial details of her sitters, and this coupled with the fact that they were on holiday in Italy when this likeness was taken, might explain the subdued quality of dress.¹⁷⁵

Others have speculated that this pose was adopted for the benefit of characterization, as in the play, Miss Prue is a silly, “awkward, unsophisticated country girl” [...] To those viewing the painting today, different adjectives would be used to describe her pose; instead of awkward, confidently sensual, and instead of unsophisticated, refined and fashionable.¹⁷⁶ Reynolds here is “intent on highlighting her enduring sex appeal at least as much as her prowess as a professional actress,” if not giving more of an indicator to her former activities as a courtesan.¹⁷⁷

As previously stated, Miss Prue was a gauche girl from the country, although she is attired as a cultured woman at the pinnacle of fashionable taste. Everything else in her demeanor was to suggest this characterization, but the most obvious and arresting part of the painting—the clothing—plays against it, and instead asks the viewer to see the sitter on the level of both actress in a role and an individual.¹⁷⁸ She sits with her legs off to the side, but her torso and face facing the viewer, her arms resting on top of the cupid’s bow crest rail [the top rail] at a perpendicular, yet greatly obtuse angle. The eye goes instantly to this area, as her wrists are adorned with the black silk bracelets that were popular over the course of much of the century, from the 1750s on (fig. 49).¹⁷⁹ They fulfill their function here, as they were supposedly worn to attract attention by way of their startling contrast between pale, porcelain white flesh and the matte shine of the black fabric. When compared to other depictions of this style of bracelet in Reynolds’s pictures—of which out of about two thousand portraits of identified sitters there are only about thirteen examples—these stand out due to their thickness and prominence. The shortness of the sleeves of the dresses from this period encouraged the prominence of this style, although as the century drew to a close, fewer sitters are shown with such accessories, as sleeve lengths extended to just above the wrist.

¹⁷⁵ English dress was known for its subdued qualities. See remark in Hart and North 2009, 46.

¹⁷⁶ On Miss Prue’s vulgarity, see Mannings and Postle 2000, 56.

¹⁷⁷ Postle 2003, 48.

¹⁷⁸ See discussion in D’Arcy Wood 2001, 65.

¹⁷⁹ According to Ribeiro, they are a recycled fashion from the Jacobean court. See Aileen Ribeiro, “Costuming the Part: A Discourse of Fashion and Fiction in the Image of the Actress in England, 1776-1812,” in *Notorious Muse: The Actress in British Art and Culture, 1776-1812*, ed. Robyn Asleson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 108. This look was also used to emphasize the whiteness of the skin, “just as women used black-painted or mouse-skin eyebrows and patches to set off their complexions” (Palmer 2008, 209, see fig. 49).

The dress in this picture takes equal priority with the face, as almost as instantly the eye moves to the brightly colored fabric replete with ornamentation. The dress is rich, smoky pink that opens at the skirt to reveal a creamy, pink-tinged apron. The openings are bordered with lace and flouncing, though the cuffs only feature double lace flounces, which are shorter and stiffer than the flowing ruffles seen in previous examples, perhaps denoting a change in style. Her closed bodice (or stomacher?) features a repeated design of what appears to be braid frogging or another similar trimming in the same fabric (similar to what is present in the bodice of Nancy Parson's Gainsborough portrait). The neckline is deep and square, but mostly obscured by the top of the chair back.

Covering versus Revealing

The artist plays a kind of game with the viewer, exposing and obscuring certain details that ultimately draw him or her closer to the subject, increasing the intimacy of the viewing relationship. This again is another illustration of the degree of control that the courtesan had the possibility to exert over the artist. As with the image of Nancy Parsons discussed in the previous chapter (fig. 40), where her image seems to deny the viewer unlimited access to her image, here Mrs. Abington does something similar, but in a more inviting/enticing way. As with the courtesans of Socrates' time, the sitter here is "carefully rationing out sighting, carefully calculating withdrawal and disclosure."¹⁸⁰ D'Arcy Wood explains Mrs. Abington's visual ambitions in presenting herself in such a way as being acutely conscious of the function of this picture as "a carefully orchestrated publicity shot, an eighteenth-century 'glossy' combining sexual allure, high fashion, and the tantalizing promise of intimacy."¹⁸¹

Intimacy in both the way of feeling a closeness and connection with the image that one beholds, as well as the closeness that was afforded to those alive at the time who saw her perform on stage, afforded her a duality of being both "remote and available."¹⁸² This painting is a type of static performance, where the actress is dressed, presumably, as the character and sits in a pose that seems to be couched in the character of the role. She acts for us, even on canvas, and this performance was

¹⁸⁰ Postle 2003, 29.

¹⁸¹ D'Arcy Wood 2001, 66.

¹⁸² *ibid.* 66.

one that could be prolonged through its purchase long after the lights had dimmed at the theater.

There is, of course, the question of who dictated what in this agreement, whether or not the artist was solely responsible for the composition or if it was also in the hands of the sitter; in this way the artist becomes an accomplice and partaker of the actress's wish to portray herself in a light which will benefit her the most. In the case of two of her four other portraits, Mrs. Abington was the direct recipient of the paintings, paying for the full-length depiction of her as the comic muse herself (1764-68) and receiving the half-length of her as Roxalana (1782-83) free of charge as a gift from the artist.¹⁸³ It's assumed (but not completely confirmed) that she also commissioned, in addition to paid for, the picture of her as the comic muse, solidifying further the supposition that she as the subject and patron of the picture had a say in what way she was shown.

In contrast to most of the pictures of other courtesans produced by Reynolds, Mrs. Abington's portraits were not designed as studio showpieces, which served firstly to advance the fame of the artist, and only secondly that of the sitter. Although this was not the case with *Miss Prue*, Mrs. Abington was conscious of her public image, and with full knowledge of how visible she would be by being painted (due to the ensuing prints and copies) she took it upon herself to commission works herself.¹⁸⁴ Therefore, with this heightened sense of awareness on the part of both sitter and painter, the choice of what to show, and thus invite the viewer to partake of, was most likely deliberately an aspect that the subject had control over (at least in part). It therefore comes as a shock that this portrait was not reproduced at the printers until after her death (c. 1822). The reluctance to print this image is puzzling: was the pose too risqué? Did it cross the bounds of acceptability? By contrast, the portrait of herself as Roxalana in *The Sultan* (1782-3, fig. 57) was held at the printer's for six years. Our perceptions of what is socially acceptable are certainly skewed and it is sometimes difficult to readily ascertain why some pieces receive attention above others. In this case, the combination of pose, attractive dress, and active composition

¹⁸³ Postle 2003, 194 and Mannings and Postle 2000, 56.

¹⁸⁴ Of the *Comic Muse*, Mannings says, "Waterhouse further suggested that Mrs. Abington may well have commissioned and paid for this picture herself, as an advertisement" (Mannings and Postle 2000, 55). But then again, by 1813 (that is to say, within her lifetime, but certainly after her retirement) the painting was in the collection of the 3rd Duke of Dorset (ibid. 55).

make it a dynamic portrait that remains a popular image in our day, regardless of its small-scale afterlife as engraved material.

Other Portraits and Types of Representation

Reynolds certainly was not the only artist to paint the famous actress, as she sat to various other artists around London, some of who were “a great many of the best portraitists” and others who were “some of the worst.”¹⁸⁵ Richard Cosway, the famous painter of miniatures, depicted her at least twice, once as Thalia, the comic muse, and another in everyday dress from the early 1790s; both survive in engraved states only (figs. 50 and 51). Pictures of her in theatrical dress appear quite often, as books containing all of the particulars of the most famous plays to be performed on the stages of Drury Lane were popular. John Bell’s *Bell’s British Theatre* was no exception, as his guides contained not only the full scripts for all the current plays, but also cast lists for each of the theatres where the play was being performed, as well as selected portraits of the actors.

The 1777 issue features an illustration of Mrs. Abington in stage dress as Miss Prue (fig. 52). It is interesting to compare the two, as Reynolds’s painting feels more refined and less of an overly worked, comedic theatrical vignette as does this engraving (which is also strikingly similar to the aforementioned portrait by Thomas Hickey from 1775). Although the dress reads as current, it also appears as more coquette and less sophisticated, which was truer to the character than in Reynolds’s portrayal. She wears what appears to be a closed-robe dress with an open bodice that only allows for a much smaller portion of the stomacher than usual to be visible. The bodice itself is vaguely reminiscent of the style popular forty years earlier during the 1730s and 40s, and the open style is also by 1777 starting to become a thing of the past; new cuts were gradually being introduced starting at the beginning of the 1770s.¹⁸⁶ The sleeves are devoid of both multi-tiered ruffles and lace engageantes, but instead appear to feature the increasingly popular shirred cuffs that continue up from the opening at the elbow all the way up the arm until almost the shoulder.

The skirt is largely undecorated, with only large rosettes suspending the sweeping sash of cloth that forms a raised flounce about a fifth of the way up from the hem. Her apron, however, features the most detail, as it is a lace bordered and rosette-

¹⁸⁵ Highfill et al., 1973, 19.

¹⁸⁶ Hart and North 2009, 94.

adorned rectangular section of fabric that covers her lap from the waist to just above the flowers on her skirt. It seems to be made from solid fabric, and not gauze like Nelly O'Brien's from over a decade earlier, and is decorated with a floral pattern that harmonizes nicely with the rose details around the edges and on the two pockets that are mirrored on either side of the top portion of the apron. Around her neck is a thin, black ribbon necklace, tied in the same manner as in the full-length portrait of Mrs. Grace Elliott that was painted the year after this engraving was published. As a pendant is a tiny black cross, a simplified version of the popular diamond studded crucifix worn by fashionable ladies in their portraits (fig. 53).¹⁸⁷ Her hair is piled high and covered with a large and highly decorated cap, embellished with a feather, floral patterns, lace fringe and a single trailing lappet-like extension of the lacy trim.

Actors recognized these minor portraits was being a good source of publicity, and agreed to having these produced as a way to further recognition and encourage a following from those who admired them.¹⁸⁸ Although they also got their portraits painted at the studios of all the fashionable painters in town, they also saw the value in "serial portraiture" that, by contrast with "high" portraiture, left the production of the image completely in the hands of the draughtsman who produced "the standard imagery" according to "the publisher's needs or by the popular taste."¹⁸⁹

How this relates to the image of Mrs. Abington is indeed a curious and multifaceted case, as hers was an image that was highly sought out to be replicated. It is worth noting that she was more or less always shown in elaborate dress that never seemed to deviate from what would have been worn in the eighteenth century. The picture of her as Lady Betty Modish from the 1777 edition of the comic play *The Careless Husband* shows her in full elegant and regal dress befitting a member of the aristocracy (fig. 54). It is so highly detailed that it would be almost impossible for one not to use such representations as a guide to outfitting oneself in like manner. She wears, as her character's name suggests, a gown that was at the height of fashion. It is replete with sartorial details, such as a sweeping sack-back, lace-edged engageantes, pearls embellishments on the stomacher and bodice, gathered frills of

¹⁸⁷ Although the comparative illustration is of a woman in masquerade dress, this does not exclude the possibility that the crucifix was used as a fashionable accessory (as well as an indicator of piety, whether serious or playful).

¹⁸⁸ M. I. Aliverti, "Major Portraits and Minor Series in Eighteenth-Century Theatrical Portraiture," *Theatre Research International*, vol. 22, no. 3 (1997), 251.

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.* 251.

silk trim twisted into floral and vegetal patterns, prominent rosettes, and even tassels decorate the skirt.

Her hair is pulled up into a fantastically high tower of large sausage curls and straightened locks of hair, all topped with a floral bouquet of roses, greenery, feathers and draped pearls. The man behind her in the scene naturally fades from sight and blends in with the furnishings in comparison to the elegant, but almost overwhelmingly striking couture that she wears. The act and scene is clearly marked at the top of the sheet, designating to the viewer the exact time that she was to have worn such an outfit, thus simplifying the process of identification of specific details seen during the course of viewing a play.

Her effect on the masses was remarked upon repeatedly by those in the press, almost to the point of incredulity, as one observer (German visitor to London Baron von Archenholtz) remarked, “as she possesses the most remarkable taste, she spends a good part of the day in running about London, to give advice on the dresses and new fashions. She is consulted like a Physician and fee’d in the handsomest manner.”¹⁹⁰ She thus seems to have had her hand in influencing fashions from on stage as well as off. Over the course of her career she continued to influence, and it was a career that stretched over 25 years, which is impressive not only professionally, but also in being a style icon. In 1776, following her success with the “Abington cap,” another article of her clothing (“a very beautiful style of petticoat, of Persian origin,”) was heavily remarked upon and imitated by all “the politest circles.” Another bonnet with her name attached to it became popular and it was this association with her persona that made the consumption of her clothing seem like one was “allow[ed] possession of a part of Abington herself.”¹⁹¹

Epilogues as Fashion Statements

These articles were not all necessarily limited to display only during the actual stage performance itself, as actresses also fulfilled extra roles as themselves during so-called “epilogues” to performances. Epilogues were “commercial add-on genres designed to coax the audience into returning for another night’s performance” that usually involved actresses returning to the stage, dressed to the nines, and delivering either a comic or dramatic monologue that more or less begged the audience to return

¹⁹⁰ Highfill et al. 1973, 18.

¹⁹¹ Nussbaum 2010, 231.

“reinforcing the commercial nature of actresses as procurers.”¹⁹² Here again, we see actresses acting as prostitutes, displaying their wares and enticing others to return for more. This form of publicity, however, was seen as acceptable (and furthermore in terms of fashion for it furthered the influence of the actress) as “epilogues ... frequently engaged the audience in a way that broke the barrier of the stage’s edge; and ... the audience would have relied increasingly on imaginative access to [actors].”¹⁹³ As the actress fulfilled her role as herself in the epilogue as she stood at the edge of the stage, she was able to level the playing field and “equalize the relationship,” thus allowing for accessibility to her physical articles of clothing to seem more tangible. This is also similar to what was discussed in chapter two, namely that what stars have are *supposed* to appear accessible to viewers, as there is a level of aspiration that takes over and makes one want to possess a piece of their fame.¹⁹⁴ It is possibly due to these closing performances that broke down the “fourth wall” that women felt like they could mimic and more readily consume the image of the fashionable actress, whose life seemed more exciting and covetable than their own. Even if the actresses’ life was rife with scandal, it was the observation from afar that made the person still a safe person to copy; all the excitement of scandal was present through the mimesis of her fashionability, without the negativity of the actual experience.

If we examine at the plate illustrating the epilogue to “The Tragedy of Zingis” from 1779 (fig. 55), we see an image of Mrs. Abington dressed in full splendor from head to toe. Ostrich feathers top an already towering white powdered wig, her closed-bodice dress flowing to the floor and embellished heavily with ruffles, lace, and flowers.¹⁹⁵ Attached to her elbow-length sleeves are flowing engageantes that extend almost to her knees and her petticoat is broadly viewable as all the components of her skirt are stretched across a set of hoops that make it difficult *not* to take notice.

It is important to note the distractive role that clothing played in the life and success of Mrs. Abington, as unlike with the portrait by Nathaniel Hone of Kitty Fisher, undress was not the main draw element to draw in the crowds. Kitty was

¹⁹² *ibid.* 236 and 21.

¹⁹³ *ibid.* 21.

¹⁹⁴ Dyer 1998, 38.

¹⁹⁵ Compare this to the heavily embroidered French dresses of the time. The abundance in adornment was prominent in dress from both countries. See example of a French robe and petticoat dating from 1765-70 in the collection of the Museum of London, fig. 56 (detail).

shown sitting in her (?) room, but the presence of a tasseled curtain suggested something more theatrical, as if she were on stage and the curtain was drawn aside to present to reveal the unfolding drama. Crowds are even shown to assemble outside of her window and take in the spectacle of catching her in *deshabillé*, which would have been certainly a curious fantasy for many who were interested in the life and actions of the celebrated courtesan. In the case of Abington, multitudes flocked to see her dressed in the highest and most intricate forms of fashion and without audibly entreating others to follow her sartorial lead, the women of the capital did so anyway. Her “manipulation of her accessories and of fashion *distracted* from her body parts to claim a voguish femininity... that bolstered her performative identity and produced a mighty impact as a fashion deity [...]”¹⁹⁶

Even though she did have a past that was similar to those of her fellow courtesans, Abington was able to mask it under a cloak of fame that seemed impenetrable to the outside world. Many of her biographers during her time did not stress her innocent and scandal-free past, neglecting to capitalize on neither her past, nor present affairs, of which certainly many existed.¹⁹⁷ One went as far as to assert that “[Abington] in private life, deserves no small share of praise for the unobtrusive manner and general propriety of her conduct [...]”¹⁹⁸ The act of wearing fashionable clothing diverted attention away from her activities off stage that had brought her to such a high point in her career, “activities” that surely aligned her more closely with Kitty Fisher than with Sarah Siddons.¹⁹⁹ But it also this ambiguity of past actions that cemented her celebrity, perhaps *because of* any perceived link between her and the most famous courtesan of the century. In any case, it would be safe to compare her with Kitty Fisher in one way, at least: they both were considered fashion icons to the point that the word “mania” would be the only fit way to describe their sartorial popularity.

¹⁹⁶ Nussbaum 2010, 244.

¹⁹⁷ Perry 2003, 63.

¹⁹⁸ Quote from “Biographical Sketch of Mrs. Abington” in *The Monthly Mirror: Reflecting Men and Manners* 4, November 1797 (p. 264) in Perry 2003, 64.

¹⁹⁹ Sarah Siddons, the greatest tragic actress of her day, did her best to cultivate and protect her reputation as a respected mother and wife. For examples, see Perry 2003, 63-64, Crouch 1997, 70, and McCreery 2004, 82.

Conclusion

Over the course of this study, I have examined the image of the courtesan through several media in order to try and establish what made them fashion icons and trendsetters to the women in their society. The main question that underpinned all the other questions in my investigation was, “what was it that these courtesans did to make them accepted ‘fashion role models’ for the masses?” Their role as prostitutes, which in many societies past and present spells alienation, scorn, and disrespect, did not seem to keep them from achieving levels of recognition and prosperity similar to that of the rich and famous of their day. Of course, it is easy to say, especially in light of the thesis that has just been presented, that these women *were* the “rich and famous,” but this is not the whole story, of course.

As we’ve seen, social factors, such as class play a large part in overall acceptance. And it is here that the separation is evident, as the observing and mimicking from afar by women of eighteenth-century England was wholly acceptable, for these women were inspired by not the actual *person* of the courtesan, but the *image*. Images were easily consumable, and therefore it was easy to incorporate fashionable bits into wardrobes without being faced with the moral and social tension that was caused by what the courtesan was. This is one of the reasons why I assert that their images were popular methods for possible fashion emulation; ease and accessibility were the main contributing factors.

Unfortunately, I do not believe that I fully came to a wholly satisfactory conclusion with my results, as there is still sometimes a gap between the image and the direct influence on the clothing that actually ended up being worn by women of this time. But I am pleased, however, that there was a link established between the modes of representation of both courtesans and aristocratic sitters. It is encouraging to see that women did readily have themselves painted in the same manner as the famous courtesans. The paintings of Kitty Fisher remain the most influential, and for very good reason, as they were like nothing seen before in portraiture. Of course, there were the seventeenth-century ‘beauties’ (some of whom were royal mistresses and prostitutes) that were painted by Godfrey Kneller and Peter Lely, but, unlike most of the examples seen of Kitty, they were represented in fancy dress. This cripples the process of imitating style, and instead only a change in physical attributes can be sought after (i.e. hairstyle). Fisher’s appearance in period dress, boldly posing in the

same way as her lover's demure sister brought that particular compositional style lasting fame, which cannot be said for every subject who sat for Reynolds.

In the paintings that I mentioned in the footnotes of chapter one of Reynolds's possible portrait of Kitty Fisher, and the two paintings by Ramsay of aristocratic (and even noble!) women (fig. 5, 6, and 7), the parallels are obvious, from the mimicking of the muff to the floral arrangement in the hair. This leads me to believe that the *image* itself of the courtesan was considered by different people to mean different things. To some, like Ramsay's sitters, it was most likely seen as being harmless, almost disarmed and safe to handle. But to others, as seen in chapter two's quotes by Cindy McCreery, it was seen as being thrilling, and it was that thrill that drew them into the purchasing the images and seeking to incorporate details into the lives of their clothing.²⁰⁰ For other still, it was morally reprehensible to even look at the images, because it was with the eyes that one first committed wrong. Strangely, however, it is looking that unites these three viewpoints together. As mentioned in chapter four, any kind of attention was beneficial to the fame of an actor, and in this case, with the attention being drawn to these prints in order to dissuade women from actually *looking* at them, such admonition only served to strengthen the power of the visual image.

The output of prints and engravings is the cornerstone of my study, and I think that it is there that one can truly see the effects of the consumption and emulation of these images. The fact that so many states exist for every single painting shows that people at this time were craving different types of representations in order to, as I quoted Clayton as saying in chapter two, broaden their world view. Since so many are still existing today, it made for a fascinating study to see which elements were emphasized by the engravers, what was left out, and what was added.

Chapter three reminded us that courtesans were not always universally accepted as being a part of visible society. Scandal, of course, has its victims everywhere, but both of the sitters (Elliott and Parsons) had political scandals to stand criticism for. That is interesting to note in light of the growing trend towards morality that began at the end of the eighteenth century, as these liberated women still managed to mingle amongst those at the top of the social ladder. The criticism against them did not just encompass politics, but also the way they dressed. It is of interest to

²⁰⁰ Page 33 of this thesis.

note that there are fewer engravings of Grace Elliott available for study, and even fewer of Nancy Parsons, even though the leading portraitists in England painted them both. It is possibly because of the expanding anxieties attached to their visibility and social mobility, and these factors began to infringe on their popularity. A direct consequence of this, however, is that their clothing had less exposure, and therefore they most likely had less of an impact on fashion and trends.

This was not the case with Mrs. Abington, who was the toast of London and by extension, all of Britain, not only for her prowess on the stage, but also the way that she marketed and cultivated her image as a fashionable woman who was worthy of being imitated. Although her self-made identity of “Mrs. Abington as Fashion Phenomenon” did not require much tending to as women flocked to anything that had her name attached to it, it was something that she was able to have because she was an independent woman of means (thanks to her first long-term courtesanal liaison). Her ability to remain ambiguous about her past, coupled with maintaining her stage presence even during everyday dealings in the public sphere, served to advance her up the social ladder of influence.

Further Research

In this thesis, I realized quite far along that it would have been helpful to incorporate not only the aristocratic members of society, but also the middle and lower classes. The theories of conspicuous consumption and trickling down surely must have been at work, and I would have liked to be able to explore those issues further. I also would like to devote more time to the investigation of identity and luxury in the portraits of courtesans. There are plenty of resources dealing with luxury and consumption during this period and I would like to delve further into these aspects sometime in the future.

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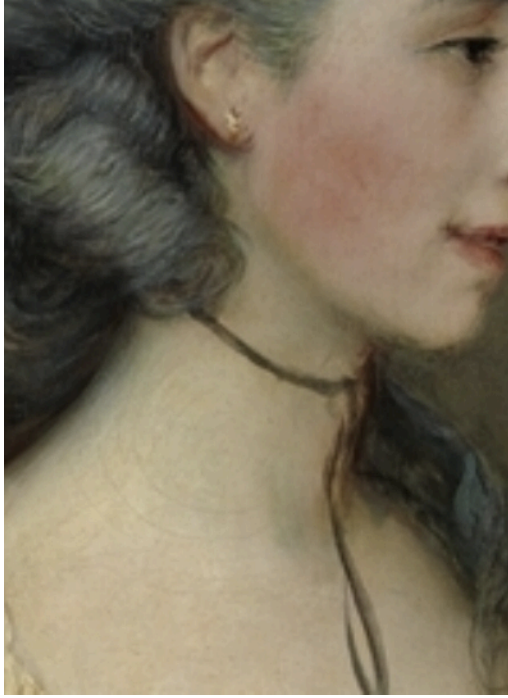


Fig. 26. Detail of Thomas Gainsborough, *Mrs. Grace Dalrymple Elliott* (fig. 24).
Fig. 27. Joshua Reynolds, *Miss Hickey*, 1773. Oil on canvas, 76.8 x 63.7 cm. Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.



Fig. 28. Pompeo Batoni, *James Caufeild, First Earl of Charlemont*, 1753-56. Oil on canvas. Paul Mellon Collection, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.



Fig. 29. Thomas Gainsborough, *Mary, Countess Howe*, c. 1763-4. Oil on canvas. Iveagh Bequest, Kenwood, English Heritage.

Fig. 30. Thomas Gainsborough, *Lady Alston*, 1760-65. Oil on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Fig. 31. Thomas Gainsborough, *Grace Dalrymple Elliott*, c. 1782. Oil on canvas, 76.52 x 63.5 cm. The Frick Collection, New York.

Fig. 32. François Boucher, *Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, Marquise de Pompadour*, 1758. Oil on canvas, 81.2 x 64.9 cm. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge (Massachusetts).



Fig. 33. Detail of Thomas Gainsborough, *Grace Dalrymple Elliott* (fig. 31).

Fig. 34. Detail of François Boucher, *Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, Marquise de Pompadour* (fig. 32).



Fig. 36. Thomas Gainsborough, *Mrs. Mary Robinson (Perdita)*, 1781. Oil on canvas, 233.7 x 153 cm. The Wallace Collection, London.

Fig. 37. Thomas Gainsborough, *Mrs. Siddons*, 1785. Oil on canvas, 126 x 99.5 cm. National Gallery of Art, London.



Fig. 38. Joshua Reynolds, *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, and Her Daughter* (detail), 1784. Oil on canvas, 112.4 x 140.3 cm. The Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth, Derbyshire.
 Fig. 39. George Romney, *Mrs. Bryan Cooke (Frances Puleston)* (detail), c. 1787-91. Oil on canvas, 127 x 100.3 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 40. After Thomas Gainsborough, *Anne Maynard (née Parsons), Viscountess Maynard ('Nancy Parsons')*, mid-nineteenth century. Mezzotint, 23 x 17.8 cm (plate). National Portrait Gallery, London.
 Fig. 41. Joshua Reynolds, *Mrs. Horton, Later Viscountess Maynard*, 1767-69. Oil on canvas, 92.1 x 71.1 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 42a. George Willison, *Nancy Parsons in Turkish Dress*, c. 1771. Oil on copper. Paul Mellon Collection, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.

Fig. 42b. After George Willison, *Nancy Parsons*, 1771. Engraved by James Watson. Mezzotint, 60.3 x 45.6 cm. The Trustees of the British Museum, London.



Fig. 43a. Jean-Etienne Liotard (1702-1789), *Portrait of Mary Gunning, Countess of Coventry*, 1749. Pastel. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Fig. 43b. Joshua Reynolds, *Mrs. Baldwin*, 1782. Oil on canvas, 141 x 110 cm. The Trustees of the Bowood Collection, Wiltshire (United Kingdom).

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Fig. 44. *The Female Pilot. A Prime Minister. Tête-à-Tête portraits of Nancy Parsons and the Duke of Grafton in Town and Country Magazine (March 1769), 113-13. Engraving. The British Library.*



Fig. 45. *Miss Charlotte S-r / The D- of D-*, 1777. Engraving, 10.7 x 17.6 cm. The Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 46. Frans Hals, *Willem Coymans*, 1645. Oil on canvas, 77 x 64 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington D. C.



Fig. 47. Joshua Reynolds, *Mrs. Abington as 'Miss Prue,'* 1771. Oil on canvas, 76.8 x 63.7 cm. Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.

Fig. 48. Angelica Kauffmann, *David Garrick*, 1764. Oil on canvas. Collection of the Marquess of Exeter, Burghley House, United Kingdom.



Fig. 49. Joshua Reynolds, *Lady Cunliffe*, 1761. Oil on canvas, 86 x 68 cm. Private collection.



Fig. 50. After Richard Cosway (print by Francesco Bartolozzi), *Mrs. Abington as the Comic Muse*, 1783. Stipple and etching, 27.6 x 21.6 cm. Trustees of the British Museum, London.
Fig. 51. After Richard Cosway (print by William Lane), *Mrs. Abington*, 1790. Soft-ground etching, 17.9 x 12.2 cm. The Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 52. Henry Morland (1730-1797), *The Fair Nun Unmasked*, c. 1769. Oil on canvas. Leeds Museum and Art Galleries (Temple Newsam House).

Fig. 53. J. Thornthwaite after James Roberts, *Mrs. Abington in the Character of Miss Prue*. Published for Bell's British Theatre, 1777. Etching. Dipartimento di Storia delle Arti, Università di Pisa, Italy.



Fig. 54. Isaac Taylor, *Mrs. Abington in the Character of Lady Betty Modish*. Illustration from Colley Cibber's "The Careless Husband" in *The New English Theatre*, January 1777. Published by T. Lowndes and Partners. Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 55. After Daniel Dodd (print by Thomas Cook). *Mrs. Abington in the Epilogue to "The Tragedy of Zingis,"* 1779. Etching and engraving, 16.8 x 10 cm. The Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 56. French, Dress with stomacher and petticoat, 1765 (fabric), altered around 1770 (detail). Shot silk, ribbon, bobbin lace, and floral sprays. Museum of London, A12413.

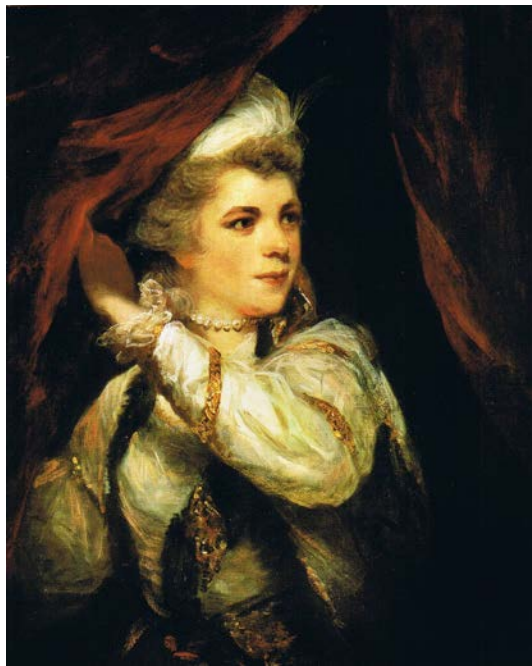


Fig. 57. Joshua Reynolds, *Mrs. Abington as Roxalana in 'The Sultan,'* 1782-3. Oil on canvas, 74 x 65 cm. Untraced.