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Bitches in Britches:

Transgressive Representations of Gender Fluidity on the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Stage

Imagine: you are an Eighteenth century English audience member at the Drury Lane Theatre. You've seen many men tread these boards in various garb, pretending to be high-ranking officials, licentious rakes, and sometimes even hilarious old women. You've also witnessed many a young woman come and go on the stage— singing beautiful melodies, performing the roles of lovers and mothers, flashing titillating glimpses of ankle here and there from beneath their long dress forms. Now imagine a new face—a fresh-faced young lad enters from the wings. He opens his mouth to begin the performance and you realize there is something different about his voice, something innately feminine. As the performance continues, you come to recognize the womanly shape beneath the breeches and realize this new performer is not new at all—it is a female member of the company whom you have seen many times before. Suddenly, you are entranced, both by the undeniable versatility of this young woman, and by the hypnotizing shape of her female body in the close-fitting pants of a male ingénue.

In her award-winning book, *Spectacles of Reform*, Amy Hughes observes how “extraordinary bodies violate rules, disrupt conventions, and defy expectations,” subverting social normativity.<sup>1</sup> She goes on to write “the viewer’s complicated relationship with a human

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes, Amy E. *Spectacles of Reform: Theater and Activism in Nineteenth-Century America*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2014. 25.

‘on view’ helps to explain the curiosity and contempt inspired by spectacle,” especially considering the very public nature of these performances of female bodies on display in male garb.<sup>2</sup> Focusing on the performance of Margaret “Peg” Woffington as Sir Harry Wildair, I hope to illuminate how the spectacle of cross-dressing in the eighteenth century public theatre often led to incredible fame tempered with a contemptuous infamy. I aim to analyze this innovative and complicated, cross-dressing female performer not only within the shifting sands of celebrity, but also as a gender-bending giant—pushing the limits of what a female body could and could not do on the eighteenth century stage.

### No Press Is Bad Press... Unless it's About a Woman

Although the actor as celebrity began roughly around the rise of David Garrick, the actress as celebrity was often a contradictory impossibility—fame and infamy were inevitably entangled when dealing with female performers of the period. Actresses were expected to uphold a rigorous moral code that paradoxically included public decency (despite their performances on the stage) and adherence to models of public decorum (although they often played opposite men who were not their husbands). According to Gill Perry, the new term ‘actress’<sup>3</sup> was better understood as a woman “playing herself” rather than performing a role like her male counterparts.<sup>4</sup> To perform breeches or travesty roles was a conflict of interest. With this theory behind the performances of young actresses, it is understandable why so many scholars, especially when writing about the celebrity of some of the period’s foremost female actresses, tend to footnote or leave out entirely any times that these women performed in drag—saving their written reputations from such negative slander for another decade.

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<sup>2</sup> Hughes, 25

<sup>3</sup> First published as a definable word in Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* in 1755.

<sup>4</sup> Perry, 10.

Breeches roles were slightly less offensive to moral decorum—after all, they were still performing a female part, it just so happened that they were forced to dress in drag for the purposes of plot progression. These roles ended with the actress back in her skirts and petticoats, bringing back the natural balance of femininity on the stage before the curtains closed. What I focus on in this paper are performers of travesty roles; male roles written to be performed by men but commandeered by female performers. Although these roles showcased the multi-faceted abilities of young actresses, they presented many issues for the faint-hearted, more pious members of the audience. Perry claims that breeches and travesty roles were most often presented for the spectacle: “to display the female body—especially the legs and thighs—and enthrall the audience (both male and female).”<sup>5</sup> With this in mind, it is understandable why many proponents of morality who objected to the profaneness of the English Stage (as Jeremy Collier would famously call it) would take issue with the women daring to perform such roles.

#### Peg Woffington and the “Stunning Success” of a “Close-Fitting Suit of Satin and Lace”<sup>6</sup>

In the case of Margaret “Peg” Woffington, her first travesty role led to the ultimate flourishing of her stage career. Coming from a poverty-stricken home, Peg was discovered over the course of a few weeks by well-known actress/manager of *The Lilliputians*, Signora Violante. Before her rise to fame, she played her very first male role under the tutelage of Violante in John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*. This 1731 production didn’t gain much critical notice, but the billings for the performance did make mention of “the part of Macheath by the celebrated Miss Woffington,” no small feat for an up-and-coming actress.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Perry, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Dunbar, Janet. *Peg Woffington and Her World*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968. 38.

<sup>7</sup> Dunbar, 19.

Peg began to make a name for herself playing the breeches part of Silvia in *The Recruiting Officer*, a part she took over when the renowned Irish actress George Anne Bellamy left Ireland for London stardom. Woffington's "interesting shape" and "intriguing mixture of swaggering man and bewitching girl" won the hearts of many who saw her at the Aungier Street Theatre Royal.<sup>8</sup> With this success in mind, she began to think about her next big career move. Knowing her proficiency in breeches and the undeniable box office draw in the spectacle of a shapely woman in pants, Peg made a bold step that would soon send her to London as a star: she suggested to her company manager, Mr. Elrington, to grant her the part of Sir Harry Wildair in George Farquhar's hit, *The Constant Couple*.

The role of Wildair, "a high-spirited rake, witty, good-natured, devil-may-care," was created by Robert Wilks, another young Irishman who transferred to London performing the role to much acclaim.<sup>9</sup> It was said that "no man would venture on Wildair for at least a generation, for fear of being unfavourably compared with the incomparable Wilks"<sup>10</sup> Peg, bright and daring, decided to challenge that—after all, she was a *woman* venturing to take on the role, not a man. Aware of the novelty but afraid of the moral backlash, Elrington didn't over-publicize the event until the eve of opening night. Lucky for Elrington and for Miss Woffington, "from the moment of Peg's entrance, dashing and debonair, her figure set off to perfection by the close-fitting suit of satin and lace, the evening was a stunning success. Never had anyone looked so splendid on the stage."<sup>11</sup>

It didn't take long before this spectacular role of Miss Woffington's gained public notice and commendation. Her name quickly became a part of general household conversation. She was

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>11</sup> Dunbar, 38.

the subject of discussion in many drawing rooms and clubs; dramatic critics and poets began noting her figure and performance in the town journals:

That excellent Peg  
Who showed such a leg  
When lately she dressed in men's clothes--  
A creature uncommon  
Who's both man and woman  
And the chief of the belles and the beaux!<sup>12</sup>

Theatre manager Thomas Sheridan's notorious Dublin Beefsteak Club even elected Peg Woffington as president— "the only woman to be a member of the Club."<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, all praise and celebrity comes with a price. The female members of her company glared behind encouraging smiles. Woffington's swift rise to fame bumped her name up in playbills, not only in location but also in size (a contentious topic for actors and actresses at the time). Being the subject of discussion amongst the town was mostly positive to box office profits, but being the subject behind the stage curtains was rarely so. Woffington told her friend and company member, Mr. James Quin, that "she believed that half the audience thought her to be a man, to which the embittered old gentleman replied, "Perhaps, but the other half *knows* you are a woman," exposing the popular gossip of Woffington's amorous personal affairs.<sup>14</sup> Salacious rumors of her infidelity, amplified by her immodest portrayals on stage in form-fitting breeches, would haunt her life for the remainder of her career.

With this newfound fame and fortune, Miss Woffington decided to try her hand across the water. She made a name for herself in London first by returning to the breeches role of Silvia in

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin, 183.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin, 153.

*The Recruiting Officer* in early November 1740. Two weeks later, she appeared as Sir Harry Wildair—and the Town was “at her feet. Despite the original fears around the insurmountable performances of Wilks’s original creation of the role, Peg “was so successful in the part that no male actor was thenceforth acceptable in it.”<sup>15</sup> It wasn’t long until her skills as an actress and her shape in men’s clothes brought her notoriety in the cultured city of London. A constant refrain of “Incomparable Peg!” followed her; “Indeed, to know her was to love her—and she was not indisposed to be loved.”<sup>16</sup>

After falling in love with a young man whom she found out to be cheating on her with a Miss Dallaway, “She remembered her success as Sir Harry Wildair, and decided to make the acquaintance of Miss Dallaway in the attire of a young man of fashion.”<sup>17</sup> It is said that the young Miss Dallaway fell for Miss Woffington in disguise, thanking her for imparting the truth of her adulterous lover and wishing that Peg was romantically available considering her honest nature. The story ends with Peg leaving Miss Dallaway behind, never letting her know that the young boy who saved her failed relationship was never a boy to begin with. Although the story is perhaps more on the apocryphal side, it is nonetheless an interesting account of her abilities to perform manhood without being caught. A few years later, Miss Woffington’s fame made it the ears of the renowned David Garrick. After wooing her to join his company, they shared a home in London, taking turns paying rent. It is possible that Garrick actually intended to marry Peg—until he found out about her various other “admirers.”<sup>18</sup> Although it is unknown as to whether or not Miss Woffington actually dallied in any way with these men, her immoral reputation in breeches was enough to convince Garrick of her ability to be unfaithful to him.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin, 163.

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin, 173-4.

After her romantic fallout with Garrick, her reputation took a huge hit. As her company manager as well as her ex, Garrick “began lessening Peg’s status as an actress. New plays were produced without her being offered a role; old plays were revived and Peg’s well-known parts given to other actresses—one of the worst slights which a manager could inflict on one who had for year been a principal player.”<sup>19</sup> Her reputation tarnished, despite her lingering love for Garrick, it wasn’t long until Miss Woffington would be forced to travel away from London to regain her popularity. She spent the rest of her career between London, Paris, and Dublin.

Miss Woffington straddled the line of fame and infamy better than most actresses at the time. She never made it to the level of celebrity of some of her peers, but she was, nonetheless, a favorite of the eighteenth century stage. Her public life was hounded by gossip and her private life suffered in response. Her bravery in playing breeches and travesty roles may have brought her fame, but they also led to nasty rumors moving her from moral femininity to wily temptress. Never afraid to show her shape in public, Miss Woffington knew how to bring the audience to the stage—the spectacle of her shapely form drew equal crowds of men and women, hoping to catch a sight of this woman publicly breeching moral codes.

### Bitches in Britches: Crafting Celebrity

The spectacle of women in pants on stage in the eighteenth century was a novelty commodity for many theatres. Such roles were utilized by young, transgressive actresses to gain fame and fortune-- but with every blessing, there is a curse. Breeches and travesty roles, because of their immense public notice, also brought with them a particularly infamous reputation. For a woman to wear men’s clothing on stage was scandalous (though it is worth noting that when men dressed up as women on the stage, commentary focused primarily on the burlesque quality of the

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<sup>19</sup> Dunbar, 158.

dressing- up itself, rather than on how the body was viewed in gendered garb<sup>20</sup>). These roles were a boon to their performance abilities, but a shot to the heart of their moral and modest reputations.

Peg Woffington's first foray into breeches brought her fame, but the reputation associated with her continued performance of these roles led to her inevitable fall from grace. Despite all of this, her objectified body on stage made space for the coming of the era of New Women that would take the world by storm in the Victorian period. Women who were unafraid to (gender)bend the rules and take risks—educated women with goals to make money on their own without relying on the traditional female narrative of “marry well and have many children.” I speculate that independent and independently wealthy women in the public sphere, like Peg Woffington, paved the way for the eventual emergence of the Victorian New Woman. Although Peg was not the first or the last woman to perform to much acclaim in men's clothing, I use her as a case study in hopes of showcasing how such women infiltrated the public eye with grace—creating a genealogy of women working towards gender equality on the stage through the physical labor of their bodies on stage.

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<sup>20</sup> West, 113.



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