Kristin Bailey

Introduction

In his Preface to the 1728 play *The Provok’d Husband*, Colley Cibber acknowledges the performers who “so evidently contributed to the support of this comedy” and thanks them for all that they did to ensure the play’s success. Anne Oldfield received special recognition from Cibber; forty-nine of the preface’s 116 lines are dedicated to her praise. Cibber extols her sense of timing, her expressive voice and eyes, her costuming choices, and her “natural good sense.” The reason Cibber gives for describing Oldfield at such length is that:

‘Tis not enough to say she *here outdid* her usual *excellence*. I might therefore justly leave her to the constant admiration of those spectators who have the pleasure of living while she is an actress. But as this is not the only time she has been the life of what I have given to the public, so perhaps my saying a little more of so memorable an actress may give this play a chance to be read, when the people of this age shall be ancestors.¹

Ironically, while Cibber linked his play to Oldfield’s name to increase its readership, it is only because he mentions her here and in other writings that many modern scholars know her name.

As one of Oldfield’s managers and co-performers as well as a playwright who designed some of

¹ John Vanbrugh and Colley Cibber, *The Provok’d Husband*, Ed. Peter Dixon (Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1973), 6-8. The quotation used in the dissertation’s title is from John Philip Kemble’s notes as manager of the Theatre Royal at Drury Lane (Add MS 31,972, hereafter referred to as “Kemble’s Notebook”). He describes Jordan’s willingness to use her popularity and any other means at her disposal during a 1790 contract negotiation. While Kemble wrote in anger and did not mean this as a complement, I find it an appropriate description of women who combined skills and kinds of work to build their profession.
his most celebrated characters for her to perform, Cibber knew well how her work, backstage and in front of the audience, shaped performance and interpretation. Modern scholars could benefit from a similarly full view of actresses’ contributions. Scholars of eighteenth-century British literature and history have recognized how the conditions surrounding the printing of books and pamphlets and the material conditions of writers affect writing, and they have embraced the study of the book as an effective means of expanding their understanding of texts. Critics who study early women writers, in particular, have been interested in the ways their lives and writing conditions shaped their product.

In recent years, as important recovery work on women in all fields has been done, scholars have grown increasingly interested in women in the theatre. While many of these critics deal predominantly with female playwrights and others (drawing on reader reception theory and practicing what Thomas A. King labels “the privileging of spectatorship over performance”) study the women in the audience and the theatrical dynamic as those women experienced it, some scholars in the last fifteen years have begun to turn their attention to actresses. As Elizabeth Howe has observed, “The overall impact of the female playwrights was also necessarily limited by the fact that they created only a fraction of the drama performed between 1660 and 1700. In contrast, almost every play staged had at least one role for the actress, whose effect on theatre was much greater.” This comparative activity level held true through the

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2 Thomas A. King, ““As if (she) were made on purpose to put the whole world into good Humour”: Reconstructing the First English Actresses” *TDR* 36.3 (1992): 78-102, 82. Pat Gill, *Interpreting Ladies: Women, Wit and morality in the Restoration Comedy of Manners* (Athens: U Georgia P, 1994), and Katherine M. Quinsey, ed. *Broken Boundaries: Women and Feminism in Restoration Drama* (Lexington: The UP of Kentucky, 1996) are examples of valuable studies of women in the eighteenth-century theatre that surprisingly neglect actresses.

eighteenth century, as well; relatively few plays staged were written by women. Actresses, on
stage day after day, were far more influential in their culture than female playwrights. Kristina
Straub, Ellen Donkin, Matthew J. Kinservik, and James Peck (all of whose work I discuss in this
project) are among the most notable of the scholars who are beginning to study eighteenth-
century English actresses as members of a profession. I contribute to this growing discussion of
women on the eighteenth-century English stage by compiling evidence of the various kinds of
labor that went into a career in theatre.\textsuperscript{4}

Because eighteenth-century performances were ephemeral, many scholars have attended
to subjects about which we have more concrete evidence: written play texts, physical theatre
space, discussions of how performances should be shaped. In eighteenth-century studies,
scholars have not yet attended in a systematic way to another source of valuable information: the
work that went into maintaining a career as a woman on the licensed London stage. Oldfield and
other performers in the eighteenth century often developed their parts with a great deal of
autonomy. Without regular directorial oversight, players developed their own readings of plays
and characters, made their own staging decisions, selected and often provided their own
costumes, and managed the generally rowdy audience during performances. Clearly, a deeper
understanding of the people who did this work would enrich the study of the plays and

\textsuperscript{4} Groundbreaking work on actresses in other periods shows eighteenth-century scholars the kinds
of progress that can be made when we turn our attention to actresses and provides us with
valuable frames for research into women on the eighteenth-century London stage. Theatre
historians and literary critics such as Elizabeth Howe and Deborah Payne (who focus on the
Restoration stage), Melveena McKendrick (sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain), Tracy C.
Davis, Joel L. Kaplan, and Sheila Stowell (the Victorian stage), Catherine A. Schuler (late
nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian theatre), and Gay Gibson Cima (twentieth-
century international) among others have shifted much needed critical attention to the ways in
which actresses have contributed to theatre through the ages.

3.
The dual purpose of this dissertation is to reclaim some sense of what was involved in the everyday professional lives of eighteenth-century starring actresses in London and to suggest a new frame that allows literary critics, theatre historians, feminist scholars, labor historians, and other interested scholars to shift their focus from the more glamorous – and sexy – aspects of actresses’ fame to the richer and much more intricately woven tapestry that made up their lives as working women. Although many actress biographers and other scholars have discussed an actress’s work in the context of her life, this is the first extended study dedicated to the many tasks actresses as a group in eighteenth-century London had to accomplish just to maintain a successful career. As this project demonstrates, actresses had to accomplish much – from contract negotiations to managing their relationships with colleagues, from role selection to costuming – behind the scenes and before the performances. All this work was necessary for women who wanted to survive by providing financial support for themselves and their families.

As American psychologist Abraham Maslowe demonstrated in his 1967 “Hierarchy of Needs,” humans’ basic biological needs – for shelter, sustenance, and safety from predators – must be satisfied before they can begin to concern themselves with high-level goals and emotional needs. This hierarchy holds true for these actresses as well. Actresses had to achieve a certain degree of stability and security before they could concern themselves with the risky business of making political statements and striving for increased power within their profession and culture, as Sandra Richards suggests was a primary concern in her book The Rise of the

5 In fact, many biographies from the eighteenth century to now have paid surprisingly little attention to their subjects’ work, focusing instead of sexuality, relationships with famous people, and other more titillating subjects. I hope to help move actresses’ working lives back to the center of the frame by showing how much time and effort went into their careers.
English Actress. While many actresses were too busy trying to earn a subsistence-level living even to concern themselves very much with art, other such as Anne Oldfield and Sarah Siddons did reach a level of economic, social, and emotional stability that permitted them to take creative risks with the way they staged their parts. But even these most successful actresses, who enjoyed the riches, perquisites, and power unknown to more ordinary performers, had to deal with the realities of rehearsal, costuming, contract negotiations, and other quotidian behind-the-scenes professional tasks, not to mention the fear of alienating their core audiences and ultimately lessening their professional standing.

This study focuses on the most prominent women on stage: women such as Anne Oldfield (1683?-1730), Hannah Pritchard (1709-68), Kitty Clive (1711-85), Susannah Maria Cibber (1714-66), Margaret Woffington (1717?-60), Frances Abington (1737-1815), Mary Ann Yates (1738-87), Sarah Siddons (1755-1831), and Dorothy Jordan (1761-1816), who were the most recognized financial, popular, and critical successes of the period.\(^6\) They were the major attendance draws for audience members, and they also received the most individual attention in the media about the theatre; we have far more evidence about these women than about their less widely praised contemporaries. These women most often played starring roles, long parts that were central to plays. By nature of their greater number of leading roles, starring actresses had more opportunity to affect the way an audience saw a play than did their more ordinary counterparts, who played smaller, less pivotal parts with fewer lines.\(^7\) Their centrality to the

\(^6\) The explosion of print media during the eighteenth century also means that there is more available information on later actresses than on those who lived earlier.

\(^7\) The use of the terms “star” or “starring” in reference to eighteenth-century performers is an anachronism, since the star system as we recognize it did not formally come into being until the nineteenth century. However, in the absence of any similarly helpful language from the eighteenth century, I will make use of this terminology throughout. I decided to use “starring”
plays and time spent in front of the audience is a major reason scholars should concern
themselves with actresses, and especially with starring actresses. I also limit my study to the
two London theatres that held royal patents for the simple reason that starring actresses and the
licensed theatre went hand-in-hand in eighteenth-century London. As I will discuss later, there
were other venues for performing, but the government imposed a highly regulated system that
made the licensed theatres the most attractive places of employment for actresses who were
fortunate enough to choose where to work. Examination of company lists in The London Stage
yields ample evidence that starring actresses, who would have been welcomed at any theatre,
chose to perform in the licensed theatres.

Most of my discussion of starring actresses centers on the extraordinary mass of actresses
who performed in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. The years between 1730 and
1770 saw a large number of talented women who competed for the audience’s attention and the
management’s favor: Cibber, Clive, Woffington, Pritchard, Abington, Yates, Jane Pope, and
Maria Macklin among others. No one or two or even three actresses can be said to have
dominated the stage during those years, as Oldfield dominated during the first three decades of
the century and as Siddons and to a lesser degree Jordan did in the last fifteen years of the

___ rather than words like “leading,” “prominent,” or other more neutral terms because it connotes
for the modern reader as other words do not a sense of both the professional power these
actresses had on stage and the cult of personality – the celebrity – these women held for many of
their viewers. These actresses were much more than people who animated the lines of a play; they
were important popular presences in themselves, and people who paid any attention to the
theatre knew about their lives away from the stage as well.

I recognize that less important actresses did not share many of the circumstances of their
starring counterparts, and further study of less successful actresses will yield yet more important
information. For this initial examination of women working in the eighteenth-century licensed
London theatres, however, I find that there is more than enough surviving evidence of starring
actresses’ work habits to support this project.
century. Starring actresses who performed between 1730 and 1770 provide a remarkable body of evidence about working in the eighteenth-century theatre. There is a mass of surviving evidence about women on the stage in the mid-century for another reason: most of them performed opposite David Garrick for at least part of their careers. David Garrick is the dominant male in the eighteenth-century theatre, and the middle part of the century, when he was a starring actor and very hands-on theatre manager, is often referred to as the “Age of Garrick.”

Because Garrick was such a commanding figure, people saved his papers almost as carefully as though they were religious relics (in fact, after his death some of his possessions were passed around in much the same way that relics were in earlier centuries). The bulk of our evidence about actresses who performed with and under Garrick comes to us through him. Although much of my discussion centers on actresses between 1730-1770, both because there were so many fine performers during those years and because of the amount of evidence that comes to us through Garrick, I include actresses throughout the century in this study. Oldfield, Siddons, and others were important to the eighteenth-century theatre, and an examination of the very different professional dynamic experienced by these performers who stood alone far above their contemporaries, as opposed to the competition among actresses between 1730-1770, completed this project.

Before we can begin to study what the performers did, however, we need a sense of who they were. There remains a common assumption that players were drawn from the lower ranks.

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9 I prefer not to label the middle years of the century the “Age of Garrick” for the purpose of this study. He looms large enough in the period and the profession, not to mention two centuries of scholarship on the era, without my placing his name at the center of this project to upstage the actresses I discuss.

7.
of society, that they were people so desperate for work that they would brave a disreputable profession and public condemnation. In fact, that is not true of most performers. Highfill notes that “the theatres were populated very heavily by folk belonging to the middle and upper-middle layers of the socio-economic strata. A good many were scions of the gentry. Some married sons and daughters of gentility without exciting scandal – though seldom without complaint” (147). While certainly some performers came from abject poverty, or perhaps even an earlier life of prostitution, as Ann Cately did, that was not the norm. The average performer came from a more stable and comfortable background.

The demands of the repertory system, which required performers to have thirty or more – sometimes many more – parts ready to perform at short notice, required a degree of literacy. It would have been impractical, if not impossible, for someone to coach another player and keep her ready to act in whatever play was announced. Highfill sums it up simply: “With actors there is, of course, an assumption of literacy.” He continues, “But a great many were also well educated, ‘literary,’ and many were even learned. A sizeable number had attended good public schools, a university or the Inns of Court, and many . . . were good classicists.” While men naturally had far more opportunity for advanced preparation than women, actresses were generally quite capable of reading and interpreting their parts, and many of them wrote for publication themselves. Although they generally received less formal education than men, it was no unheard of for actresses to be extremely well educated. Maria Macklin, mid-century performer and daughter of the celebrated actor Charles Macklin, was taught French and Italian, took a trip to the continent, and studied music, drawing, and the belles letters. She was
reportedly “one of the most accomplished women in England.”\textsuperscript{10}

Many players had connections with other professional and trades, whether through family members or apprenticeships of their own. Anne Oldfield, for instance, was apprenticed to a seamstress in Westminster. Many of the men were Free Masons. David Garrick was a member of an even more exclusive club: Samuel Johnson’s Literary Club. James Boswell refuted claims by Sir John Hawkins and Hester Piozzi, both of whom had fallen out with Johnson, that Garrick was barred from membership. Instead, Boswell wrote that, “when Garrick was regularly proposed . . . Johnson . . . warmly and kindly supported him, and he [Garrick] was accordingly elected . . . and continued to attend our meetings to the time of his death.”\textsuperscript{11} Although a career on the stage may once have carried with it an assumption of low morality, well-established performers on the licensed London stage gained a level of middle-class respectability by the middle of the century.

While women were not permitted membership in the Ancient Free and Accepted Masons or Johnson’s Literary Club, acting elevated the social position of some women who undertook it in a way that virtually no other career could have done. Many starring actresses were received in aristocratic circles. Anne Oldfield counted John and Sarah Churchill, the first Duke and Duchess of Marlborough, among her friends. (The Duke’s brother, Charles Churchill, was her longtime partner and the father of one of her sons, and the Duke and Duchess welcomed Oldfield into their acquaintance.) Oldfield’s pallbearers included three men who bore the title of “Lord.” Horace Walpole invited Kitty Clive to retire to a cottage on his estate, Strawberry Hill, because she was

such interesting company. Although Clive was the entirely respectable daughter of a lawyer, it is difficult to imagine another line of work that would have led her to a quiet retirement at Strawberry Hill. Sarah Siddons, the daughter of strolling players, became friends with some of the best-known and most influential people of her day, including Samuel Johnson, Hester Piozzi, and scores of aristocratic women. Siddons was also invited to visit with the royal family from time to time. In addition to the enormous financial rewards earned by the most successful actresses, the profession gave them access to people with whom they would not have been acquainted in another walk of life.

Actresses’ sexuality has always been of interest both to their original audiences and to subsequent writers. The profession required that actresses be public figures in a way that virtually no other line of work did for women. By definition, actresses presented their bodies for public view and interpretation. Although women writers were sometimes ridiculed and worse for daring to express their opinions and creativity publicly, it was nevertheless possible for a female author to remain anonymous if she chose. Even those who opted to make their authorship known generally did not make their bodies available for critique as well. It was possible to read a book by a woman author without being forced to confront the physical reality of her femaleness. However, everyone who saw an actress on stage was acutely aware of her female body. It was her tool and she relied on it as her major means of expression. Women on

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12 In fact, by the last decade of the seventeenth century, theatre-goers had coined a separate word explicitly acknowledging female performers' essential difference from male actors. The word “actress” was recognizable enough to be spoken in the epilogue of John Dryden's play *Pilgrim*, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites its first known appearance in print in 1700 (J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, prep., *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 20 vol. [Oxford: Clarendon P., 1991], 1.131-32). Elizabeth Howe records even earlier manuscript uses of the
stage chose to show themselves publicly, and they had an officially sanctioned forum for doing so, which puts them in a position unique for the period. People paid to see (among other things) actresses give flesh to roles that were by definition incomplete as long as they remained on the page. This gave actresses of every rank a public presence afforded to few women in the eighteenth century.

As Kristina Straub notes, “actresses were caught in crosscurrents that defined their sexuality as public by profession and private by gender.” The women themselves did not draw a clear distinction between the sexual, the private and the professional. In fact, some actresses traded on their reputations, whether for sexual promiscuity or chastity, to bolster their stage personae. They recognized that physicality and sexuality were intimately connected with their business. Even so, it cannot always have been easy to work in a field where even their own manager sometimes treated them with disrespect based on profession-related assumptions. While actresses were generally seen as more respectable by the end of the century than at the beginning, they were still subject to sexual harassment or worse, sometimes from within their own theatres. In 1775 Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who would soon become the owner of the Drury Lane Theatre, wrote an impassioned and misogynistic letter to his father-in-law, Thomas Linley, arguing that no good could come up Linley's daughter Mary going on the stage because all actresses were of poor character. In 1795 John Philip Kemble, a co-manager of the Drury Lane company, was accused of attempting to rape Maria Theresa DeCamp, an actress in the

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word (Howe, *First English Actresses*, 21, 24). Although I recognize that the word “actress” has fallen out of vogue with some feminists, I prefer to use it rather than “female actor,” because it is the word used by my subjects and their audience members.  

company (and his future sister-in-law). There was an enormous outcry, and Kemble was eventually forced to apologize. This episode illustrates the ambiguous position of actresses even late in the period: Kemble (the brother of famously virtuous starring actress Sarah Siddons) apparently thought he could get away with raping an actress – or he expected her to consent. Despite Kemble's expectations, DeCamp and many supporters found his behavior unacceptable, and DeCamp's profession did not make a difference.

As Philip Highfill, editor of *A Biographical Dictionary*, writes, in fact popular assumptions about the licentiousness of actors and actresses were much exaggerated. Although there were many publications trumpeting the alleged sexual irregularities of performers (publications that Highfill observes have distorted our views to this day), “at no time during the century were significant numbers of the corps of performers deserving of the castigation of moralists.”

Highfill goes on to argue that, despite the sexual peccadilloes of such public people attracting extraordinary attention, performers on average were not more likely to engage on pre- or extra-marital sexual affairs than was the population of eighteenth-century England at large. Rather, he tells us, contrary to the still widespread belief that actresses engaged in frequent and open sexual affairs (as opposed to the sexual attraction they often raised simply by appearing on stage to do their jobs), “outward regularity was obviously to their social and (at benefit time) even pecuniary advantage, and man were bywords for rectitude and religion” (150). Many actresses, such as Kitty Clive and Sarah Siddons, felt the need to underline their morality and what conservative today would call “family values,” to combat incorrect assumptions people made about the sexuality of actresses.

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Despite the constant, almost obsessive, attention to their personal and sex lives and the persistent belief that actresses were women of easy virtue, there was much that made acting an appealing profession for respectable women. It was no doubt the enormous salaries often earned by starring actresses that led many women to attempt the craft. Although performing was a risky and unstable business or people who had not yet established themselves, it offered enormous potential rewards – riches that eighteenth-century women had no other opportunity to earn for themselves. And the incomes of starring actresses rose dramatically over the course of the century. As early as 1708 Anne Oldfield signed a contract for £200 per year, plus a clear benefit, that is a benefit performance free of the customary charges due to reimburse the management for the expense of staging a play. In the mid-century, Susannah Maria Cibber contracted for as much as £700 per season plus clear benefits. By 1786, Sarah Siddons was able to boast to close friends that she had managed to save (not earn, but save) £10,000 in the four years that she had been performing in London. These were extraordinary performers who far out-earned their colleagues, but actresses who never achieved anything approaching this success were able to live quite comfortably. The account books for Covent Garden show that in 1761, when the theatre divided performers into four pay classes, actresses of even the lowest level enjoyed average earnings of £35 for fewer than forty weeks of work, and actresses who were in the highest pay level (apart from the special few like Cibber who could name their own terms) averaged £272 for the season. These salaries were quite similar to those received by name performers (and, as I will show momentarily, is far more than women in other careers earned). For comparison, top actors earned an average of £287 to actresses' £272 for the season; second drawer actors £148, which was less than comparable actresses' £158; third-level actors and
actresses were even with average salaries of £70; and fourth-level actors earned £42 to the actresses' £35. With actresses earning salaries greater than or equal to actors in two of the four pay levels it is clear that women in the theatre suffered far less from the gender gap than they did in many other lines of work. In addition to this income, actresses were free to play the Haymarket or other off-season London-area theatres, in the London fairs, or in Dublin, Edinburgh, or the counties during the summer if they could get engagements. In fact, actresses who starred on the London stage were often handsomely compensated in Dublin, Edinburgh, and English towns like Bath and York that had well-established provincial theatres by the 1770s. News of actresses' celebrity spread far, and people with no hope of visiting the capital thronged to see the women who were so famous.

All this was at a time when most other working women earned a subsistence-level income. A skilled milliner in the mid-eighteenth century could hope to earn £20 per year, plus board, and a skilled plaiter at the end of the century, when straw hats were in demand by fashionable women, earned an average of £10-£30 per year. That amounted to real wealth compared to unskilled or rural female laborers of the period. Female servants of husbandry in the middle of the century earned only £2-5 per year (about half what their male counterparts earned).

15 William Van Lennep, ed. *The London Stage, 1660-1800*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP. 1965-68. 4.1.lvii-lviii. This is, of course, a source familiar to anyone who has ever researched the theatre of the period. *The London Stage* contains dates, cast lists, and when available receipts and other information for every known play performed during the period. It also has enormously helpful introductions that describe the physical performance space, salaries and much other information. It is, however, rarely plumbed for the kinds of information I have found there. It is a major source of raw material for much of my work, especially that contained in chapter three, where I deal with actresses' benefits. I hope that my dissertation will suggest new uses for this invaluable resource.

Given that theatrical base salaries were higher than those earned by most other working women, it seems clear that a woman who thought she had the nerve and talent to face the audience could do far worse than essaying an acting career. When we understand the enormous fortunes that starring actresses could earn on the stage and the comfortable living wages that even established supporting performers could earn as the theatre became increasingly profitable during the century, it becomes much clearer why women would venture the acting profession.

In fact, more women wanted to pursue an acting career than the theatres could accommodate. When Margaret Woffington, who had established herself as one of Dublin's most popular performers, made the move to London, she found unexpected resistance. When she went to John Rich's house to ask him to hire her for the Covent Garden theatre, she was repeatedly turned away from the door. Rich's doorkeeper was accustomed to seeing beautiful young women who wanted to act, and he followed his orders to dismiss any such visitors without an audience. Finally, on her nineteenth attempt, Woffington convinced the servant to admit her. Woffington did convince Rich to engage her that day, though at a lower salary than she initially requested. She was convinced that once he saw what a success she would be, he would happily raise her pay.  

Contrary to assumptions that acting was undertaken only by women who had no other viable choice, it was a profession in which many actresses took pride. It was clearly more than simply a way to earn money for some of them. Jane Pope broke off her engagement to a stockbroker, John Pearce, when he insisted that she give up her career after the wedding. When Anne Cately wed in 1771, she insisted on a marriage contract that guaranteed that she could

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continue to act for as long as her health permitted.\textsuperscript{19} And, probably the most famous case of the eighteenth century, Dorothy Jordan kept acting for many years after she and Prince William began living and rearing a large family together, despite objections from some members of the public who thought it was unseemly for the common law wife of the king's son (and, although they could not have known it at the time, a future king – William IV – himself) to maintain such a public profession.\textsuperscript{20} While clearly there were people who continued to object to women acting, the actresses themselves were often loath to abandon their career and the money and independence it brought them.

Despite the obvious advantages of a career in the theatre and the number of women who wanted to attempt the profession, I do not mean to suggest that it was always an easy or stable way to earn a living. The theatre closed down, often for a month or longer, for the death of a member of the royal family or other events deemed significant to the English public, which sometimes abruptly left performers without a regular income. And theatres burned down several times during the century, which interrupted performances and payments and necessitated a scramble for other playing space before the company lost its position. James Gillray's satirical print “Theatrical Mendicants, relieved” (1809) demonstrates both the lengths to which company members went to raise rebuilding funds after the Covent Garden Theatre burned down and an additional, though rare, kind of work required of some players. In this print, Sarah Siddons and

\textsuperscript{19} Highfill, \textit{Biographical Dictionary}, 3:109. Interestingly, she also insisted that her marriage remain a secret until after she retired. Although this reformed prostitute turned entirely respectable after taking the stage, she evidently preferred to maintain her reputation for sexual freedom throughout her career. Perhaps, like Margaret Woffington, she thought that image helped her stage persona.

her brothers John Philip and Charles Kemble are shown begging for money to rebuild the theatre. While it was primarily John Philip Kemble's job to find the financing, Siddons lent her support and reputation to her brother's efforts. Siddons had earned a personal fortune on which to live during the year that Covent Garden was closed for rebuilding, but most actresses were far less fortunate. I suspect that other performers, in a quieter way, encouraged their patrons and friends to give to the theatre fund, as well. Unanticipated disruptions in the regular theatre schedule, whether because of a death or some mishap, were a significant problem in a profession with limited employment opportunities.

Even when theatres were open, there were frequent periods when salaries were not paid in full, and sometimes not at all. The player benefit was born in the late seventeenth century in large part as a way of compensating performers who were not otherwise being paid. In 1743 several starring players left Drury Lane in protest over Charles Fleetwood's nonpayment of salaries. Even in the late century, when theatres seated enormous audiences and should have been very profitable, Richard Brinsley Sheridan found himself often unable to pay salaries. On several occasions his starring performers refused to act until they were paid, and at one point Sarah Siddons expressed amazement that the theatre continued to function and that people showed up daily to do their jobs. A further complicating factor was that the vocal (and often physical) audience did not allow managers to raise ticket prices, which one would ordinarily expect under a virtual monopoly. There was more than one riot when a theatre tried to introduce new prices at the beginning of a season, and the prices eventually came back down. While licensed theatres may have provided stability of a sort – they had a perpetual, transferable royal

The fact that the very large and ornate theatre was funded and rebuilt so quickly with contemporary building methods is a testament to the centrality of the theatre to London life.

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patent that ensured that they would not be closed down with little notice – the patent could not guarantee good management or the managers' ability to pay the performers. As I discuss in chapter one, the relatively limited employment opportunities in eighteenth-century London put players at the mercy of management. Starring performers were virtually guaranteed a contract at a patent theatre, but they could not be sure that the theatre would not be closed down by circumstances beyond its control or that the management would take care to fulfill its obligations to the players.

Before we examine the different kinds of work actresses performed, we should have a basic understanding of the development of the eighteenth-century theatrical world in which these actresses worked. After some early upheaval, the licensed theatres themselves were reasonably stable. While the management was not always good, the royal patents ensured that the licensed theatres were protected from many forms of competition and were able to survive bad times. As Judith Milhous explains, the Restoration precedent for two theatres with a royal patent or royal license held sway for most of the eighteenth century. Turmoil within the companies and among

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22 For sixty years, the two perpetual patents were both help by John Rich and subsequent owners of Covent Garden, but a new class of patent, good for twenty-one years at a stretch, was given to Drury Lane, giving them almost as much long-term protection as Covent Garden. Both original patents dating to the Restoration are still in place today (Judith Milhous, “Contemporary Management,” in Robert D. Hume, Ed., The London Theatre World, 1660-1800 [Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1-34], 9-10).

23 For a single work that discusses most of these areas in far greater detail than I can here, see Robert D. Hume, ed., The London Theatre World, 1660-1800 (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1980). This book compiles historical essays by many of the most prominent scholars of the eighteenth-century theatre, including Judith Milhous on company management, Edward A. Langhans on the theatre buildings, Philip H. Highfill on performers and performing, George Winchester Stone on the making of a repertory, Harry William Pedicord on the audience, and Calhoun Winton on dramatic censorship, among others. It is an essential introduction for anyone interested in the theatre of the period.

managers caused the theatres to change hands repeatedly until 1714, causing a difficult employment situation for the players, who for a time (1695-1704/05) owned a theatrical cooperative at Lincoln's Inn Fields before bad management led to the dissolution of the cooperative and returned the theatre to more conventional ownership. Even that ownership changed hands frequently, however, and it was difficult for players to decide with which company it was best to sign. That problem was temporarily solved for them in 1708 when Christopher Rich's theatre was silenced, although his patent was not formally revoked. Between 1708 and 1714 there was only one licensed theatre in London, which both narrowed the players' employment options and caused other difficulties, as we will see in chapter one. In 1714, on the accession of George I, theatres had to reapply for sanction. The king continued the tradition of licensing only two playhouses (the opera operated under an entirely separate license), and the process of re-applying stabilized the theatres. The two management entities that received the royal license in 1714 maintained a steady existence through the rest of the century.

While the theatrical patent system was designed to limit competition – what Milhous calls a two-company monopoly – there were challenge to that system. In the late 1720s and 1730s a handful of smaller, competing companies were active. Principal among them were Goodman's Fields and the Haymarket, which both survived for several years and were quite influential. For many of the years between 1729 and 1737 there were as many as four major playhouses in London, in addition to the opera house, and London theatre-goers had a range of choices. Goodman's Fields and the Haymarket invigorated the London theatre scene and were home to some of the centuries most innovative plays; Henry Fielding, for instance, saw most of his plays produced at the Haymarket. Their one-year licenses, however, ensured that these two
theatres were never on the same solid footing as the patent theatres at Drury Lane and Lincoln's Inn Fields/Covent Garden; non-patent theatres were at greater risk for being closed down if they angered the wrong people. This is what eventually happened in 1737. As Milhous observes, “No challenge to the joint monopoly during the eighteenth century can be judged a lasting commercial success. The fringe theatres that sprang up during the 1730s were extremely vulnerable. Much less potent a weapon than the Licensing Act of 1737 would have sufficed to silence them” (5). Nevertheless, the existence of additional theatres provided additional employment opportunities for performers who were not hired at the two principal theatres. Goodman's Fields and the Haymarket proved important training grounds for young talent and introduced future stars to the London audience. No less a personage than David Garrick began his career at Goodman's Fields.

The relative freedom of the 1730s theatrical atmosphere granted the players greater power than they would have for most of the century. During the 1733-34 season. Theophilus Cibber, who thought he should have succeeded his father as manager of Drury Lane, led a revolt against new owner John Highmore. Several of the principal players joined him in seceding to the New Haymarket, where they established their own company. In early 1734 Highmore capitulated and sold to Charles Fleetwood, whereupon the players returned to Drury Lane. Such freedom and power were short-lived. In 1737 the Parliament responded to battling playhouses and a stream of controversial plays that satirized prime minister Robert Walpole (many by Henry Fielding) by passing the Stage Licensing Act, that had initially been rejected by Parliament in 1735. The Stage Licensing Act restricted acting in London to the two patent theatres, tightened
censorship laws for new plays, and made it illegal to act outside of London. The 1737-38 season was the first of many with only two licensed theatres in London. The censorship provisions of the Act and theatre managers fear of further offending the government and being shut down resulted in the staging of fewer new plays, and the new plays that were staged were stripped of controversial political content. Revivals of old favorites, including Shakespeare, dominated the stage.

At the same time that it de-clawed the drama, the Stage Licensing Act had the perhaps unintended consequence of reducing the players' power. In 1743, exhausted by Charles Fleetwood's poor management and nonpayment of salaries at Drury Lane, most of the principal players of that theatre once more banded together, left the theatre, and applied for their own license. This time, however, the legal climate was far different from 1733. The license was denied, the players had no place of employment and no income, and they were eventually forced to accept Fleetwood's terms and return to work. Because Fleetwood was eager to bring David Garrick back onto the stage, he agreed to take back all the rebels except Charles Macklin, to whom he assigned the bulk of the blame for the uprising. Fleetwood also punished the outspoken Kitty Clive by offering her far lower contract terms than she had earned the previous season. She rejected those terms but received exactly the same offer from Covent Garden, where she eventually signed. The following season, no one would sign Clive until November, when high-powered supporters intervened on her behalf. As we will see in chapter one, Clive and

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25 The law against performing outside London was rarely enforced by the local magistrates, and there remained an active circuit of traveling companies throughout the century. Many cities even built their own permanent theatres, despite the law. In 1768 the first patent was granted to a provincial theatre; the Royal Theatre, Bath soon became the most important theatre outside London. Six more such patents followed by 1779 (Cecil Price, *Theatre in the Age of Garrick* [Totowa NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973], 175-83).
others suspected the theatres of acting in concert to keep the players under control.

The theatre operated under these circumstances, with only two playhouses at Drury Lane and Covent Garden, and far more revivals than new plays, for almost thirty years. There were a number of attempts to subvert the law—a number of people tried to establish music halls, in which people would pay to hear the music with a play then offered for free, and Charles Macklin, who ran a school for players, staged performances at the Haymarket to give his students experience in front of an audience—but these were quickly shut down. London was clearly capable of supporting more than two theatres, and many people were eager to take advantage of the large and active audience. This proved difficult for many years, however; the patent theatres were quick to call governmental attention to violations of the law, as soon as they suspected the small theatres might hurt their profits. While these small enterprises afforded an opportunity for would-be performers to exercise their craft and potentially catch the attention of managers or influential patrons, the unlicensed theatres were at far too great a risk of closure to tempt starring performers.26

Finally, in 1766, Samuel Foote was granted a license, good for only his lifetime, to operate a summer theatre at the Haymarket. The Haymarket's license carefully restricted its season so that it could pose no serious competition to the two patent houses, but the existence of the third house provided summer employment for performers who sought it, and it also provided another opportunity for new talent to enter the profession, be noticed by the audience, and perhaps secure a contract with one of the principal companies.27 While the theatrical landscape –

26 Note, for instance, that when Clive was not hired by either licensed theatre in 1744 she chose to remain unemployed while she battled the management there rather than to seek work from a small, unlicensed venue.
27 After Foote's death the license was extended, but was always restricted to a summer season.
with two patent theatres at Drury Lane and Covent Garden, a licensed summer theatre at the Haymarket, and the opera operating under a separate patent system at the King's Theatre – did not change from a legal standpoint until 1843, the granting of the Foote license seems to have signaled a new, more lenient age. In the final decades of the eighteenth century, unlicensed theatres began once again to operate, to survive, and even to thrive in the London area. These new theatres created an opportunity for more performers to work in the profession and for a greater range of plays, of the sort that were not staged at Drury Lane or Covent Garden, to be produced.\(^\text{28}\) The licensing system created a trade-off for the theatres: relative stability but regulation at licensed theatres versus more artistic license but greater instability at unlicensed theatres.

Historians of the eighteenth-century theatre have noted that the tight restrictions of the Stage Licensing Act led to an environment that virtually ensured ongoing employment for the players who established a foothold on the London stage. The lack of competition and fear of angering a government that had proven itself willing to restrict theatrical activity kept the theatres cautious and conservative. There was relatively little change in the theatre and, with the emphasis on revivals of familiar plays and the mediocre plays that were written during most of the century, performers achieved an unprecedented importance. A Edwin Duerr observes:

Attention, it is said, was focused in the ration of 70 percent on casts and 30 percent on scripts. A play in Garrick's time “was regarded almost solely as the vehicle for a 'star' performer. . . .” Actors and Actresses who 'possessed' certain

\(^{28}\) A future project could valuably enrich our knowledge of the eighteenth-century London theatre scene by exploring the smaller unlicensed theatres and actresses who worked in them. However, as I explained earlier, I limit this project to the starring actresses and patent theatres at which they performed.

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roles accounted for the success of old and new playwrights. The companies, therefore, were relatively stable and relatively small. “An actor might come to the London stage from one of the Dublin theatres or from a provincial troupe, or occasionally he might make his first appearance at one of the London patent houses; but once he was accepted by the audiences in London, he usually remained attached to the Drury Lane of Covent Garden company until he retired from the stage.”

Without competing theatres, there was less opportunity for new talent to displace the established players than there was under a more competitive system. Once a starring – or even less celebrated but established – player had received audience support, Philip Highfill concurs, she or he could count on years of employment on the London stage:

Performers' articles of employment were for limited periods; no one had permanent tenure. Yet a sizeable and very slowly changing number of durable favorites of the first three ranks went on revolving repertory year after year and largely in the same companies – passing along traditions, adapting to changes of fashion, honing skills, and developing before the second half of the century a high degree of professionalism.

This professionalism included not only accepted codes of behavior (support for one another's benefits, a system for notification and attendance of rehearsals) but also such formal structures as the pension fund established to help performers in retirement. Although we do not generally

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think of theatre as a stable profession, the starring performers in eighteenth-century London, who are the subject of this study, had remarkably long-lasting and regular careers – a thirty- to forty-year career in London was not uncommon, and Charles Macklin had an impressive sixty-six year career – with great audience support.

With the performers’ long careers, age certainly became a concern, but it seems to have been less off a factor than one would expect. Performers “owned” their parts, so actresses continued to play their favorite parts well beyond the point of chronological verisimilitude. Susannah Maria Cibber was praised in her forties for her portrayals of young heroines including Juliet, Ophelia, and Belvidera. People generally failed to comment on her age at all, but in 1763 Archibald Dalziel wrote that “tho’ I am credibly informed that she is about the age of sixty [she was 49], she can very well do the part of a girl of five and twenty.”31 Granted, Dalziel thought Cibber’s age was worth bringing up, so it must have been a factor by that time, but he felt that Cibber credibly played the part of women half her age. But ownership of parts does not account for the times when actresses originated characters that were far younger than they, as when Frances Abington became the first Lady Teazle (a part that was written for her) when she was almost as old as Sir Thomas King, who played Sir Peter and, at forty, several years older than the character. I suspect that the absence of complaint about aging actresses playing ingenues indicates that London theatre audiences had grown so accustomed to suspending their disbelief, with English actors playing characters from all over the world and with an often inappropriate mixture of costumes, that they accepted the performers as they appeared, as long as they performances were strong.

31 Quoted in Highfill, Biographical Dictionary, 3.277.
London theatres went through many physical changes that affected performers' stage work, not only from career to career but even within a long career; players had to adapt to new spaces and technologies as they developed. The most obvious change was that the theatres grew tremendously between 1700 and 1800. For instance, the theatre that housed the Drury Lane company had a capacity of fewer than 1,000 viewers in 1700. That building was altered so that the management could fit about 2,000 audience members into the same space by 1762. The new theatre built for the company in 1775 held as many as 2,300 people. And finally, the building that housed the company beginning in 1794 had a capacity of 3,611. A four-fold increase in capacity of this company's theatre in the space of one hundred years is indicative both of the growth in London's population and the enduring popularity of the theatre. As theatres grew larger and scenery, machinery, and sets grew more elaborate in the last quarter of the century, acting had to adapt to keep from being overwhelmed. The more subtle performances that communicated well to an audience in the intimate space of earlier theatres was lost in the barns of the 1790s. James Boaden observed how Siddons changed her movements to fill the larger space and convey her performance to distant viewers in the back of the auditorium: “In a small space the turns are quick and short. Where the area is considerable the step is wider, the figure more erect, and the whole progress more grand and powerful; the action is more from the shoulder, and we now first begin to hear of the perfect form of Mrs. Siddons's arm.” When Siddons had to perform in the cavernous theatres of the 1790s (she claimed to dislike them despite her mastery of the space), she adapted her movements to compensate for the larger space.

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Lighting improved significantly over the one hundred years that concern this study. Houselights remained up for performances throughout the century, even as the quality of stage lighting got better. Eighteenth-century stages were lit by sidelights in the wings and footlights; overhead lights above the proscenium were used early in the century but were done away with in the middle of the century. Oil lamps replaced candles by the mid-century and brought brighter lighting. While the lighting was not especially strong, it was bright enough that stage directions sometime called for dimming the lights for certain scenes; it was not so dark that audiences had to peer through gloom at the players. By 1790, London theatres were using Argand lamps, which provided greater light without irritating smoke. Lighting added special effects, as well, with colored screens and glasses used to throw color over entire scenes or certain parts of the stage to set a certain mood.\textsuperscript{34} The amount and quality of lighting affected performance possibilities. Dimly lit theatres limited the performance area of a play. Performers could use only the best lit areas and those closest to the audience, especially in scenes that depended heavily on their facial expressions. As lighting conditions improved over the century, performers became freer to move around and make more creative performative choices. Once the scenic area could be fully lit by the Argand lamps, players were free to use the entire area for performing without fear that their expressions could not be seen. Another possible effect of the relatively dim lighting during much of the century is that allowed performers to get away with things that would not have been possible on a better lit stage. This might range from costume

\textsuperscript{34} Colin Visser, “Scenery and Technical Design,” in Hume, ed., \textit{The London Theatre World}, 66-118. In fact, by the end of the century the cost of elaborate scenery and machinery had risen so rapidly that “the percentage of the budget spent on performers of all kinds was roughly half at the end of the century what it had been in Garrick's day” despite the numbers of performers being greater (Milhous, “Company Management,” in Hume, ed., \textit{The London Theatre World}, 22-23).
choices to subtle signals to fellow performers, and it may even have helped unskilled performers and actresses who had become too old to play their characters realistically; signs of aging are among the things that are easily distinguished by poor lighting.

Although actresses' circumstances varied widely during the eighteenth century, one key fact to remember is that much of the work actresses did remained largely unchanged from the beginning of the period to the end. Learning lines was still learning lines, rehearsal protocols remained essentially the same, and people were still people when it came time to convince a fellow player to act in a benefit. These repetitive, essential, daily or seasonal tasks that surrounded the production of plays are the primary subject of this study. I divide starring actresses' work into three major areas of concern: the many overlooked but essential chores that were not directly related to performance, the tasks that were involved with bringing a play successfully to the stage, and the combination of tasks that went into a benefit performance, both behind-the-scenes negotiations and the performance planning.

This study opens with an examination of the almost entirely unrecognized but vitally important work actresses had to accomplish backstage. Chapter one begins with an examination of the labor conditions in which actresses worked and continues with a survey of actresses' many and varied tasks that were not directly related to performance. Perhaps the most important condition of employment that complicated a theatrical career was the existence, for much of the century, of only two licensed London theatres from which performers could seek legitimate employment in the city. As I will show, operating within such a closed labor market put actresses at a considerable disadvantage when it was time to negotiate with theatre management.
Moreover, unlike their male counterparts, even starring actresses were not allowed by social convention to hold management positions in the licensed London theatres throughout the century. Whereas men – the famous strong of actor-managers during the century – were able to set the rules, women in the profession were forced to work with the rules as others defined them. This is not to say that actresses, especially the most popular and financially successful of them, did not have influence over the decision-makers, but having influence is far different from being a decision-maker oneself.

Working within the constraints of the eighteenth-century theatrical system, actresses had much work to do apart from acting and preparing performances. Chief among this work was contract negotiation; unlike performers of today, these women did not have agents to take care of their business for them, and most preferred to handle this task themselves instead of relying on husbands or male partners. Actresses conducted their own negotiations with the male management, which often included their peers and even inferiors on the stage, and they signed their own contracts. Among their negotiation tools were appeals to the public to pressure theatre management into doing what the actress thought was right. This aspect of the theatrical career is among the most woefully overlooked areas of the women's work, and for students of literature it proves especially informative. While performance shows an actress's reading and interpretive skills, this other, less generally acknowledged duty reflects her skills as a creator of text – whether this text be a letter addressed to her public or her own life story (which she may have written herself as a memoir or simply shaped and disseminated through less direct means). Finally, I examine the effect of pregnancy and child rearing on actresses' working lives. Clearly their male counterparts did not share these concerns, and it is telling how actresses chose to
handle this physiological difference. By examining how actresses handle these unheralded and non-performance-related aspects of their professions, we gain a far richer view of these women and their many skills than anyone has advanced to date.

Chapter two shifts focus and deals with performance, by far the most widely recognized of an actress's work responsibilities and the most closely related to literary critical concerns. However, few people have given sufficient consideration to the amount of work that went into preparing to perform on the eighteenth-century stage. A primary reason actresses' professionalism is given less attention than it deserves is because of the suggestion, popular in the eighteenth century, that powerful performances sprang straight from nature, not art. It was high praise when the audience thought a performance was effortless enough to have been inspired by nature. This belief may have increased the audience's enjoyment of a performance, but ultimately it has not served players' reputations well. The idea of performance coming from nature persisted despite actresses such as Kitty Clive and Sarah Siddons taking pains to remind their audiences how hard they worked to bring them pleasure. Even in this twentieth century, critical works on performance in the eighteenth century tended to focus much more closely on the male performers, especially on David Garrick, who wrote treatises about acting and therefore called attention specifically to his art, than on the woman who acted with them. While no one can, of course, genuinely believe performance was as effortless as the sprung-from-nature theory would suggest, no one has yet addressed the gulf this idea has left in the scholarship. Chapter two corrects this oversight by outlining the widely varied tasks and enormous amount of work that went into performing through a single season, let alone through a career that may have encompassed well more than two hundred parts.
Rather than attempting to recreate a particular performance, which is an almost impossible task given the emotive rather than descriptive nature of eighteenth-century commentary on performance, or examine performance styles, which is being examined by other scholars, I examine the range of jobs that an actress had to complete in order to take the stage: accepting or selecting parts, studying roles, rehearsing, costuming, and managing the audience during a performance.\textsuperscript{35} The primary skill that underlay all of these duties was interpretation. Players in the eighteenth century received far less direction than performers do today, which means that performers had the ability to shape a part, and therefore a play, with very little intervention by anyone. They had to choose and convince managers to assign them parts that were well suited to their skills, read and interpret their roles within the plays, determine how to present those roles on stage, rehearse with other performers who had each done her or his own interpretation, often select and provide their own costumes, and, finally, perform in front of an often boisterous audience. Not only did they have to act several nights a week, but they often had to have thirty or more plays prepared at any given time, since the repertory system used in the eighteenth-century theatre meant that they could be called upon to perform any of them at a day's notice (or even less warning in the event of illness or another unexpected problem that interfered with the staging of the announced play). Although academic criticism from the eighteenth century to today has given much attention to the most memorable of the actresses' performances, it has often neglected the work that went into creating these moments. I suggest that when we attend to the many ways in which they prepared for a performance we see

eighteenth-century actresses as far more active interpreters of text than most previous scholars have recognized.

My final chapter focuses on a single aspect of the acting profession that required the skillful blending of many of the skills discussed before: the benefit performance. Players had a level of control over their benefit nights that eluded them during much of the theatrical season, and a wide range of skills was required to stage a successful benefit. Each actress awarded an individual benefit, a perquisite reserved for the players who had established a name and rapport with the audience, negotiated a date for the performance, selected her own play, arranged for fellow actors to perform for her, advertised and sold her own tickets, and finally performed. Although actresses had to work well with others to succeed in the profession, no other aspect of their working lives required them to be effective politicians in the way that benefit planning did. They had to work with everyone from managers to fellow performers to supporters in the theatre-going public in order to bring together all the elements of a successful benefit night. As I will show, an actress who managed her benefits carefully earned not only a large income from the performance but also higher regard as a performer, control over some parts of her repertoire, and greater influence within her company. The mixture of skills involved and the potential stakes of a skillfully managed night make the benefit the ideal capstone subject for the study of actresses as working women. The benefit did, after all, come about as a way to compensate a great actress, Elizabeth Barry, for the sexist refusal to admit her as a sharer in her theatre company.

In this project, I provide a new frame for looking at eighteenth-century starring actresses
in London by compiling evidence of the many and varied kinds of work that went into creating and maintaining a successful career in the licensed theatre. Kristina Straub makes an enormously important assertion that illuminates the source of the frames that have dominated to this point. Of the way people have represented eighteenth-century actresses' relationships to their careers, she says, “the actress's professionalism is usually articulated less in terms of skill or knowledge than in terms of a desire to 'go on the stage.'” 36 This is the crux of critics' long-standing resistance to approaching these actresses as professionals whose work affected the meaning of their art. Many of their contemporaries trivialized these woman as having suspect or “girlish” motives for embarking on theatrical careers, and as Philip Highfill has noted, that dismissive attitude survived well into the twentieth century. At the end of All the King’s Ladies John Harold Wilson concludes not that the Restoration actresses he studies faced down opposition and objectification to break new ground and carve out an increasingly respectable professional space for themselves and their followers, not that they learned and influenced their craft despite the absence of role models, but rather that “When we remember also that many actresses were trivial-minded women, interested in acting not as a career but only as a means of displaying their wares to prospective buyers, we can only conclude that their chief effect on dramatic literature was to push it steadily in the direction of sex and sensuality.” 37 Fortunately, many recent scholars have rejected that view, and we are beginning to work toward a thick description of the actresses, their cultural and social importance, and their place in the theatrical profession. When we note that attention was focused far more intensely on the starring players than on the plays and that actresses had to complete widely varied tasks in order to perform, it

36 Straub, Sexual Suspects, 98.
becomes clear that we need to understand far more about the working lives of the most prominent women on the London stage. This project contributes to the burgeoning discussion of eighteenth-century actresses in London by demonstrating what kinds of work the most successful actresses put into a career on the licensed stage. Once we have a fuller understanding of actresses' working lives, we can begin to understand the different ways in which this work shaped their art.