# THE MUSIC-HALL ACTRESS AND TRANSCENDING FEMINITY IN THE VICTORIAN PUBLIC SPHERE: A RE-ORIENTATION OF HER MORAL STATUS

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Abstract

The actress, like the prostitute, was one of the female figures who in the nineteenth century bore a certain social stigma for being professionally active in public and non-domestic roles that were considered vulgar and immoral. This prejudiced view is indebted to the ideology of separate spheres, which has proven to be both class-bound and unstable. While critics as Davis (1991) and Kift (1996) have questioned the overgeneralised association between actresses and prostitutes, feminist scholars have challenged the strict separation of gendered spheres, and argued for the instability and fluidity of this spatial divide. Taking this as a starting point, this essay addresses the Victorian popular actress from a feminist perspective to explore the transcendental role she had in music-hall culture. I will explore how this popular entertainment developed from a working-class culture and question the applicability of bourgeoise values and the ideology of separate spheres to the music hall. In doing so, I hope to shed new light over the music-hall actress as a working woman demonstrating that she was better esteemed than previously admitted, and argue that she turned the music hall into a space of self-fulfillment though subversion and transcendence of female roles.

Keywords: Actress, Music hall, transcending, Victorian popular entertainment, public / private dichotomy.

LA ACTRIZ DEL *MUSIC HALL*: TRANSCENDIENDO LA FEMINIDAD EN LA ESFERA PÚBLICA

Resumen

En el siglo xix, tanto la actriz como la prostituta eran mujeres socialmente estigmatizadas por su profesión poco doméstica, vulgar e inmoral. Mientras críticos como Davis (1991) y Kift (1996) han debatido sobre la generalización excesiva de asociar a la actriz con la prostituta, críticos feministas han interrogado una separación estricta y radical en distintas esferas según género, razonando que las barreras ideológicas y espaciales eran inestables y fluidas. Desde este punto de partida, el presente ensayo aborda un estudio sobre la actriz popular victoriana desde una perspectiva feminista para explorar cómo excede roles femeninos dentro de la cultura del *music hall*. Nuestro objetivo principal consiste en arrojar luz sobre cómo la actriz del *music hall* era una mujer trabajadora apreciada por su profesionalidad y talento. Pretendemos demostrar que, lejos de su asociación con la prostituta, la actriz convirtió el *music hall* en un espacio de realización personal donde podía socavar y transcender los roles femeninos.

Palabras clave: actriz, *music hall*, transcender, entretenimiento popular victoriano, dicotomía lo público / lo privado.



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## 0. INTRODUCTION

In the volume *Actresses as Working Women* (1991) Tracy C. Davis carries out a close examination of the social identity of female performers in Victorian culture studying both the profession and its conditions. She acknowledges that the similarities that established a link between the prostitute and the actress determined her social status in the nineteenth-century. Nevertheless, simultaneously she calls attention to the exorbitant generalisation of such parallelism claiming, "the popular association between actresses and prostitutes is patently insufficient" (Davis 100). This overgeneralisation is indebted to several common characteristics of the two professions. Above all for being public and professional women who offer pleasure in exchange for money, but also because both involve physical exhibition to some degree. Consequently, the acting profession was not considered as a respectable role for women. From a bourgeois point of view, women were not expected to take an active participation in non-domestic activities or frequent social places that were considered immoral, vulgar, vicious and criminal. Still, the question whether the Victorian actress was socially on equal terms as the prostitute remains unanswered.

The principal aim of this paper is to shed new light over the actress by examining her role and perception within nineteenth-century popular culture as it provides insight into the mindset of the time.[1] Taking this as a starting point, I will argue that the binary division of separate spheres was a purely bourgeois model, and question its applicability to the working classes. First, I will give a brief description of the evolution of the music hall –from its early beginnings as a working-class leisure culture to its development into a middle-class show business– with the hope to demonstrate that bourgeois values were imposed on a working-class culture. Middle-class normativity did not reach all layers of the laboring classes and in this sense the extension of those ideals on popular culture was limited. Then, I will take a closer look at the audience and signal out the female presence among the visitors, to defy the general assumption that all women in the audience were prostitutes. Next, I will describe the special features of this popular entertainment form to finally narrow down my study to the music-hall actress and question her connection to fallen women. I hope to disclose how the music-hall actress testifies to how women working within performative spaces took advantage of the stage to transcend gendered boundaries and cultural restraints, which involved a destabilisation of the public/private dichotomy.

We generally think about Victorian women in their different roles within the doctrine of domesticity. Whether we consider them in terms of submissive housewives



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and mothers who adapted to the cult of true womanhood, or as rebellious New Women who struggled for more rights, we tend to envision these women within a middle-class frame of mind. The obvious drawback of applying this perspective is that it fosters the erroneous idea that all women were categorised according to bourgeois social mores. Therefore, I propose that the middle-class disregard for actresses has eclipsed working-class regard for female professional performers on the music-hall stage. In order to obtain a holistic picture, I encourage scholars to take a closer look at this female professional from an alternative and less class-bound angle to re-orient her moral status.

The nineteenth-century actress faced the risk of being labelled with the same social stigma as prostitutes. Although they may have shared the common ground of being public women that offered pleasure, these professionals were perceived as immoral because as public women they defied the domestic doctrine. Davis notices the fact that the actress held a public position destabilised the identification of women to the home:

> ... the actress's contravention of men's rules for feminine behaviour likened her to prostitutes not only in terms of her public profile, but also in her perceived anti-domestic choice. She was criticised for doing exactly what men did: turning outside the home for social intercourse, intellectual stimulation, and occupational fulfilment. (86)

In this sense, the actress posed a threat to the patriarchal order, which subsequently might have triggered the categorisation of the acting profession as a disrespectable occupation. Nevertheless, the concern for respectability and morality linked to the doctrine of domesticity was associated with the middle class. As Jeffrey Weeks notices, the working class had different sexual mores and pre-marital sex was indulgently overseen among the working classes (59-60). Therefore, I pose the question whether middle-class respectability was applicable to a working-class entertainment culture such as the music hall, and, more concretely, to the actress as bourgeois mores were imbedded in the cult of domesticity.

## 1. THE VICTORIAN DIVISION OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRIVATE

We tend to associate the Victorians with the ideal of domesticity, and the separation of male and female spaces into the public and the private respectively. Fact is, women held an inferior position to men in the Victorian society and were submitted to patriarchal organisational structures and constraints in every possible sense –in the eyes of the law, the church and educational system. Different legal documents, textual testimonies and literary works testify to the ways in which Victorian gendered ideals were sustained by legal, socio-political and literary constructions of masculinity and femininity. These texts have been focalised through the perspective of the educated middle and upper classes, and as a consequence, the bourgeois view of femininity and respectability may have overshadowed the

cultural ideals of the working classes. Hence, the public/private dichotomy may lead contemporary readers to wrongfully associate women with a total exclusion from the public realm.

Homogenous and static categories and representations of Victorian women have been questioned in order to attain a more holistic view of women's presence and participation in the public sphere. Scholars as Martha Vicinus, Lynda Nead and Griselda Pollock have looked beyond the bourgeois division of respectability in their approaches to nineteenth-century femininity. Vicinus's volume *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (1977) provides an overview of the gradual but irreversible change of women's lives in the nineteenth century. The critic questions clichéd thinking about the available options for Victorian women claiming that "[they] did not remain within static role of domesticity" (x). This is an issue that Nead addresses in *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (2000), in which she demonstrates how women from all classes were present on the urban scene either for leisure, pleasure or philanthropic causes (71). Additionally, Nead has stressed that these women were not necessarily considered as immoral pointing out that "respectable women did routinely walk around the city on their own, and that social and moral identities were far more diverse than the simple categories of 'pure' and 'fallen' will allow" (*Myths* 64). Another critic, Griselda Pollock calls attention to how the separation of gendered spheres was a strictly bourgeois division. It testifies to the emergence of the bourgeoisie and its forging into a separate class, which, moreover, secured a middle-class ideal of femininity different from working-class womanhood. In Pollock's words: "the division of the public and private was powerfully operative in the construction of a specifically bourgeois way of life" (68-69). Vicinus coincides with Pollock on this point, and stresses that middle-class women in particular felt the pressures of narrowly defined ideals of true womanhood and respectability (IX-X). She also highlights that "[p]rivate and public behaviour –and beliefs– were never static, and our understanding of them for different classes are still fragmentary" (Vicinus XIV). Following these lines, I suggest that the notion of a public/private divide into male and female spheres that were distinguished by moral markers of respectability, were not applicable to all layers of society. For this reason, an examination of Victorian popular culture would benefit from an analysis of music-hall culture as it reflects the working-class values.

## 2. THE VICTORIAN MUSIC HALL: LEISURE FOR THE MASSES

The Victorian music hall was a special kind of entertainment culture that staged all sorts of spectacle ranging from theatrical acts including singing and dancing to sensationalist performances like circus acts, magic acts and spiritualism. In this sense this popular leisure environment provided a multidisciplinary space of transgression and subversion, especially for women. Although the origins of the music hall are not clear, it is for certain that it originated as a working-class culture, which John Golby and Bill Purdue refer to as the "great late nineteenth-

century vehicle for working-class expression and enjoyment" (24).[2] The Victorian music hall era can be subdivided into three periods; the early music hall of the 1830s and 40s, the mid-period between the 1850 to the 70s, and the late-era from the 1880s to early twentieth century. The music hall became an institutionalised entertainment business in the 1850s when the first halls were built for this purpose only, Charles Morton's Canterbury Hall being the first one in 1852.[3] Before that, the music hall culture had existed as a peripheral entertainment in public houses where the working classes spent their leisure time. From being a complementary and free entertainment performed by amateurs at pubs and song and super rooms it would develop into a separate institution with professional actors as the century evolved. The mid-Victorian music hall is of special interest as this popular culture marks a transition from being exclusively aimed at the working class to attracting a wider audience including members from other classes.

In the 1860s the music hall had obtained great acclaim and as it grew in popularity it became more commercialised, which is anchored in the middle-class involvement in this entertainment business. Middle-class professionals became responsible for composing music-hall songs, and in this sense the lyrics did not correspond with moral values shaped by a working-class frame of mind. Peter Bailey holds that this led to an "*embourgeoisement*" of the songs as the lyrics were "drained of any radical or oppositional content" (130). As a consequence, the ideals and social norms of the upper classes were imposed on the working classes. Subsequently, this would also condition the way women in the halls were perceived. Prostitutes frequented the halls and some actresses were popularly labelled as prostitutes too. This generalisation had to do with the fact that these female professionals worked within the same leisure space, and that immoral behaviour could tarnish the reputation of female performers. Lee Jackson highlights that

> [t]he question of prostitution was also raised by the 1866 Select Committee on Theatrical Licences and Regulations, when it was suggested that select male customers were admitted to Alhambra's staff bar/canteen to fraternise with off-duty ballet girls (a long-standing theatrical tradition of young gentlemen going 'behind the scenes' to begin 'friendships' with actresses). (77)

A number of purity groups as The National Vigilance Association (NVA), The Association for the Improvement of Public Morals and the British Women's Temperance Association (BWTA) attacked the halls on ground of immorality and vice. Their negative view on popular entertainment was linked to the kind of

[2] According to Bernard Waites, the song-and-supper rooms, travelling theatre companies and the complimentary entertainment provided at the public houses are three possible origins (48-49).

[3] Charles Morton (1819-1904) is commonly acknowledged as the father of the English music hall after opening the Canterbury Hall in Lambeth (London). For a detailed description of the evolution of the music hall in London see Peter Bailey's *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (1998).

spectacle that was offered on the stage, and permitting prostitutes to move freely among the audience, which they perceived as a direct threat to respectability. In other words, "to anti-vice campaigners, theatres and music halls formed a vulgar, coarse and raucous entertainment industry, haunts of low-life, unfavourable to moral health" (Huggins 46-47). The existence of sex trade and illicit encounters in the halls, added to the fact that both prostitutes and actresses earned money by offering pleasure for money attributed them with the same social stigma. Still, this parallelism is also an overgeneralisation indebted to middle-class reforms and moralists. In Davis's words:

> Theatrical impropriety was symptomatic of a complex network of Victorian attitudes and practices. The consequence for actresses was a social identity saturated with moral equivocacy. The work, not the individual, made this inevitability. This marked their social identity in the culture. (163)

If respectability was tied to bourgeois normativity I pose the question whether it was applicable to working-class culture, and concretely to their perception of the social status of the music-hall actress.

I have earlier mentioned that members of the working class had their proper set of moral values, and their views on sexual behaviour did not necessarily coincide with middle-class norms. The leisure areas of the poorer areas of the city attracted members from all classes and the music hall turned into a cross-class social space. The Victorian middle-class view on popular entertainment was ambiguous. At the same time as the bourgeoisie saw popular culture as vulgar, immoral and low, the music halls attracted an audience and investors from the middle classes. Yet, I wish to stress that it started as a working-class culture, both for and by the people. Regardless of the entrance of the bourgeoisie into this popular entertainment sphere, the working class remained the main audience. Women were scarce in the halls during the early music-hall period, both on and off the stage. When Morton opened Canterbury Hall he also decided to admit women to any programme and publicly claimed that "'No ladies admitted' has been the chivalrous phrase in which Englishmen of the nineteenth century exclude the gentler sex from rational and refining recreations" (Morton qtd. in Waites 50). Morton was eager to secure the respectability of his entertainment business and by allowing women into the halls he aimed at demonstrating the legitimacy and subsequently dissociate the institution from vulgarity and immorality. That is, a "*less select, but respectable*" audience consisting of a "mixed crowd of men and women" (Jackson 58; emphasis added). Jackson points out that "Morton's emphasis on welcoming a mixed audience was also about subtle distinctions of class. The wives of working-class men had long accompanied their husbands to pubs and pub concert rooms (even if, [...] this could provoke consternation among moralists)" (59). The music hall was considered a morally improper environment for respectable women by anti-vice campaigners as "to the more respectable and lower middle classes, certain locations carried powerful and dangerous associations, full of vice and sin" (Huggins 57). The presence women in the audience met opprobrium

by purity groups because they were sharing a social space with prostitutes, yet working-class women continued visiting the music halls.

Several critics have challenged the general association between women in the halls and prostitutes (Walkowitz 50; Kift 64; Nead, *Myths* 180). Judith R. Walkowitz, for instance, has drawn attention to how all female visitors were not involved in sex trade pointing at the fact that respectable family parties including men with their wives or girlfriends visited the halls (45). I suggest that the image of the halls as a 'breeding ground for vice' is therefore linked to social class. In a study of the music-hall audience Dagmar Kift notices that, on the one hand, several working-class women went to the halls in search for entertainment and leisure, and on the other, the scholar recognises that the presence of prostitutes in the halls is undeniable (64). It is important though to bear in mind that pre-marital sex was accepted among the labouring classes and long-life effective relationships without legal binding were common. Therefore, women mingling with men in the audience might have caused a wrongful impression on those middle-class ladies that were accustomed to the cult of domesticity when they visited the halls. This would moreover have the effect of giving misleading numbers of prostitutes in the halls. Consequently, immoral and criminal association turned the social practices within leisure spaces into a threat against bourgeois respectability and tainted the status of popular culture with pejorative connotations. This caused great worries among the Victorian middle class, which embraced prudery and reinforced strict moral and rigid social codes as a means of identification with the upper classes and dissociation from the labouring class. Attempts to clean up the immoral landscape of the music hall were made, and one example is "...the London County Council (LCC) [, which] had regularly incorporated a motif of municipal moralizing into its attempt to regulate and "improve" popular culture in the metropolis" (Assael 743). Fact is, in the early 1890s the LCC assigned inspectors who made "1,200 visits to music halls to police behaviour, crowd and content. Immense efforts were made to make the halls respectable and eradicate 'vulgar' content by more moralistic licensing authorities" (Huggins 47).

The music hall was a liminal space were members from different social strata where brought together under the pretense of socialising and enjoying popular entertainment. The fact that prostitution occurred in the halls while members of the upper- and middle-class were flirting with the female performers backstage, may have added to the music-hall actress' stained reputation. Waites unveils that managers and waiters were even involved in procuring and stresses how special private rooms were set up for wealthy visitors who were granted entry to the artistes' canteen where they positioned chorus girls (52). The Police basically ignored its existence as this practice was not perceived neither a social threat nor to cause disorder (Waites 52; Jackson 76-77). Yet, there are no records of actresses being directly involved in prostitution. Neither are there any figures that register that these women earned money from these rich admirers. On the contrary, it is more probable that these women believed that these men enjoyed their performance on stage and therefore chose to visit them off stage as a sign of admiration. This was also a situation that opened an opportunity for genteel admirers to seduce young actresses. Yet, pre-

marital sex is not equal to procuring. If the concept of morality for working-class girls differed from middle-class ladies' view on chastity (Weeks 61), this may have led to ambiguous and class-bound views on the music-hall actress. In short, the association between the actress and the prostitute was culturally framed according to a specific class perception.

Although the middle class gained terrain within the management and organisation of the halls and subsequently influence, we ought not to underestimate the importance of the performer and his or her interpretations of manuscript and lyrics. Taking into consideration the multiple spectacles available, I wish to point out three notable characteristics of the music-hall stage; knowingness, direct address and appearing in character. Bailey recognises knowingness as the major distinctive element of the nineteenth-century music-hall culture (128). Knowingness could be defined as an interlanguage, which enabled the audience to decode the double entendre of music-hall songs and take an active part in the performance displayed on stage. Steve Attridge explains this phenomenon as follows:

> Knowingness, both drawn upon and created in the performance, facilitates a domain of *shared knowledge* and secrets about life, custom and behaviour. This tends itself to a comic pragmatism –the ironic use of official idioms and language, to nudge-a-wink humour, as well as to more overtly serious forms of shared knowledge. Knowingness activates an audience from being passive consumers to co-producers. (24; emphasis added)

Hence, music-hall performance relied on the interaction between actor and spectator, which enabled them to decode the covert meanings of the lyrics. This is closely related to the second distinctive feature of music-hall entertainment: direct address. In contrast to the audience of 'serious' theatre where spectators are expected to remain as receptors of the performance, the music-hall audience was anything but passive. Conversely, the audience participated actively in the spectacle on stage following along in the chorus of the songs; and more importantly, it was a common practice to start a dialogue with the artist on stage.

The third fundamental, and visually recognisable characteristic of music-hall performance was the stage device of appearing in persona. The artists would enter the stage impersonating the main character of the lyrics they sang. From time to time the artist would make asides to the audience commenting on the very same character he or she was impersonating. In this sense, the performer had the possibility to poke fun at or even criticise stereotyped figures often created by bourgeoisie songwriters. In the early music hall cultural figures like the chimney sweeper and the sailor were common. Later, the swell, or the Lion Comique, became the main draw of the halls in the 1860s. This music-hall character was a glamourised working-class dandy who was found of drinking, women and entertainment and saw life from the brighter side. He was a typical lordly and elegant character that centred on themes such as women and drinking and avoided topics such as work or money (Bailey 101). Nicholas Daly values the instructive quality of their performances claiming that:

> [in] their songs as well as their star personas, the lions and serio-comic female vocalists offered the working as well as the lower-middle classes lessons in how to take part in consumer society, how to be streetwise, and how to be a modern man or woman of the world. (164-65)

Taken together the three distinctive characteristics of the music-hall, knowingness, direct address and appearing in character, this Victorian popular culture would provide a public space for women. However, as I will argue, all women who took an active role in public leisure spaces like the music hall were not prostitutes nor mistaken for being a fallen woman.

## 3. THE VICTORIAN ACTRESS ON THE POPULAR STAGE

Recently, criticism that undertakes examinations of Victorian popular culture has drawn attention to socio-cultural mass phenomenon as popular theatre in order to understand the nineteenth century holistically (Monrós Gaspar 15-16). Clearly, popular culture is gaining interest of scholarly circles as it offers an insight into other viewpoints than those held by official history. Laura Monrós Gaspar validates the popular stage as an expression of contemporary ideological climate arguing, "the Victorian imagination incorporated sociological stereotypes into its visual and verbal culture which arose from changes in the economy and the mindset of the time" (157). In many ways, the music hall became a cultural site where middleclass values were subverted and moral norms clashed with the working-class mores. What is more, once women made their entrance to the halls, on and off the stage, they also altered this cultural space.

Walkowitz claims that the presence of women in the music halls changed the atmosphere in the halls, and challenged the exclusion of women in the public spheres (45). Agreeing with Walkowitz, I consider that women's presence in the halls broke with the public/private dichotomy in a double sense. First, the fact that working-class female spectators went to the halls for amusement challenged the idea that lower-class women in the audience were prostitutes. Second, the presence of women on stage as part of a public spectacle culture, not only situated them in the public sphere, but also provided a space where to challenge patriarchy and gendered restrictions.

The music-hall actress occupied a special place in society as a professional performer on the popular stage since it developed within an inherently patriarchal society as the Victorian. The popular association of the actress and the prostitute paralleled female theatrical occupations to sex trade partly for being a public woman who offers pleasure in exchange for money. However, their "anti-domestic choice" of turning outside the home to pursue professional fulfillment on the stage (Davis 86), destabilised the identification of women with the home. This concern regarding respectability and the ideal of domesticity seemed to be a class distinction. Therefore, I pose the question whether it was applicable to a working-class culture such as the music hall. As mentioned above, the music hall originated as a working-

class culture, and albeit middle-class involvement, it remained mainly a popular culture of the masses.

Barry J. Faulk remarks that the music-hall stage became an important scenario where women had the possibility to enjoy a subject position in regard to culture and assume control outside the patriarchal institutions. Subsequently, he argues, female music-hall artists were able to challenge male stereotypes through song (111-12). Similarly, Waites notes that women were able to express their concerns in public, which was often done through popular songs depicting women's experience of courtship and marriage or by describing husband-and-wife relationships in a comic vein (60). For example, the actress Vesta Victoria (1873-1951) became famous all over England for her songs that comically bewailed her misfortunes in marriage. Although most of these songs seemed to comply with women's married dependency, they did comment on their situation by adding a wry humour to themes such as alcoholism, financial problems and pregnancy (Waites 62-63). This way, the music-hall stage became a site where women could contest culturally inscribed roles and make their own meaning of their place in society.

The culture-specific knowingness of the halls often served to undermine the established social conventions of respectability and in the case of women, gendered limitations and inequalities. Female vocalists were able to ridicule and subvert bourgeoisie codes of femininity in their interpretations of the songs –which Jacqueline Bratton suggests to have served as a mirror for the female working-class audience who neither identified with nor conformed to middle-class ideals of femininity and domesticity (qtd. in Kift 47). Vicinus argues alike that the theatre constituted one of the few spaces where women were actively involved in the creation of a persona rather than "[to] wait passively to be acted on" (xix). In this sense the music hall stage offered a space for negotiating gendered restrictions and transgress limitations. Moreover, it defies the feminine ideal of domesticated and docile women. This can be seen in two popular music-hall personas that offered a titillating, yet, simultaneously a subversive spectacle: the naughty girl and the lioness comique –the female counterpart of the Lion Comique, also known as the swell character.

Appearing in character, as mentioned earlier, was one of the distinctive features of the music hall and the Naughty Girl persona was typically dressed as a naïve schoolgirl with pinafore and laces. Mary Lloyd (1870-192) who became a legendary actress was widely famous for her saucy winks and gestures. Kift highlights that the actress was capable of revealing covert messages of the lyrics by simply raising an eyebrow, swing her hips or even wiggle a finger (47). Songs like "So Shy" or "Every Little Movement" relied heavily upon Victorian imagery of women as lilies, Madonnas or Magdalenes and conveyed the middle-class conventions of womanhood; yet, only to be reversed by the actress through comic performance. Mary Lloyd for example would exaggerate her body language at specific moments and breaking off with her stage persona occasionally to make comments on the characters. Kift argues that

> [t]he particular attraction of the naughty girl lay in the fact that it blurred the lines of demarcation. To which it might be added that many women in the audience

> also rejected such lines of demarcation in their lives and the attractive alternatives offered in the halls only served to confirm their views and strengthen their self-confidence. (47)

Therefore, I would like to point out how female performers' enactments did not merely present a titillating spectacle for the male audience. Instead it also appealed to female viewers by denouncing the artificiality of middle-class images of femininity by poking fun at this socially inscribed category in public.

Male and female cross-dressing exposed the artificiality of gender roles through performative acts in the music halls. It was a very popular part of the entertainment, especially in pantomimes, and served as a tool to challenge artificiality of gender roles and social differences. Bailey claims that "the swell song exploited tensions generated by the ambiguities and oppositions of class, status, gender and generation [...] the opposition lay not just between the performer and his or her target group but between sections in the audience" (121). Breeches roles revealed gender differences and also exposed them as artificial and performative. For the actress, in particular, it played a specific role. As Davis points out "instead of losing her identity in such characters, the actress's gender was highlighted" (114). Male impersonators such as the actresses Nellie Power (1854-87) and Vesta Tilley (1864-1952) gained fame and fortune in their caricatures of swell characters and for mimicking and parodying male Lion Comiques as Champagne Charlie. Hence, actresses in breeches roles offered a double reading of gender as both a constructed category and for male and female roles as socially imposed and, thus, prone to reversal.

Up to the moment, I have spoken about female performers that enacted active roles on stage –a space where they could make their voice heard in public– and concentrated on how this disrupted the popularised image of docile wives that were tied to the home. This posed a challenge to the public/private dichotomy since the actress was a professional woman moving and working within the public sphere. What is more, the stage served as a site of contestation of gender restrictions through songs and spectacle with double entendre for comic effect which was not perceived equally by the audience. Several critics have remarked that bourgeois views on sexual behaviour did not coincide with the working-class set of norms. While Jackson has highlighted that "[t]there was no single, homogeneous 'music-hall audience'. The mix of social classes varied from hall to hall, and audience members responded differently to individual jokes" (74), Faulk has noticed that the dislike for exhibiting the female body as a spectacle was "class-bound in codes of taste and disgust" (146). Whereas the so-called 'respectable classes' met female sexuality with hostility when displayed in entertainment spaces like the music hall, all members of the audience did not react against female performances with a moral dislike. One spectacle in particular became the subject of an intense moral debate in the late-Victorian era: namely the *tableaux vivants*.[4]

[4] Also known as *poses plastiques*, living pictures or living statuary.

The *tableaux vivants* consisted in a public display of female bodies in an eroticised manner which reveals the ambiguous view on sexual desire in Victorian society. This was a particular type of spectacle that recreated classical paintings and sculptures in form of still life that were performed by actors on stage. The *tableaux vivants* gained immense popularity in the 1870s and in contrast to other popular spectacles these 'living pictures' were quite different. In comparison to other music-hall enactments that were characterised by subversive humour and a specific interaction between audience and active performer, the *tableaux vivants* were static displays of choreographed models. These music-hall recreations staged famous motifs from paintings, and they often represented women on stage in a highly eroticised light. Their limbs were nearly exposed as the actresses were dressed in tight costumes that imitated semi-nudity. Whereas the female music-hall singer and actress performed active roles and made her voice heard in public, the *tableaux vivant* model remained passive and objectified on stage. Monrós Gaspar notes that popular spectacles as the *tableaux vivants* caused debate concerning the respectability of popular forms of entertainment (174). Yet, although the *tableaux vivants* evoked hostility among the respectable classes they also questioned where to draw the line between aesthetic value and indecency.

Moreover, in spite of remaining passive and speechless on the stage during the representation of classical paintings, the public debate provided the female models a medium of social comment. While being the object of the audience's gaze on stage, the *tableaux vivants* performer challenged the public/private dichotomy by publicly displaying her body in revealing costumes. In Faulks's words: "The ensuring controversy over *tableaux vivants* instigated an intriguing exchange, *expressed and contested in the public sphere*, about women, mass entertainment, and the nature of the aesthetic" (144; emphasis added). Not surprisingly, the *tableaux vivants* became a target of moral vigilance, and the NVA and the LCC questioned the decency of this eroticised spectacle (Assael 2006). Yet, whether it was respectable or not was an ambiguous issue, and consequently, difficult to censor. As one official inspector claimed "it is a matter of difficulty to fix the exact point where the propriety ends and impropriety begins" (qtd in. Faulk 143). This debate was further complicated by a tension regarding the respectability of class and gender.

The *tableaux vivants* was also distinguished as a cross-class spectacle for two main reasons –the kind of performance it was and the space it was staged on. On the one hand, the actresses were mainly from a working-class background. This implied that when impersonating characters from famous paintings these women overstepped their assigned class identity by erasing indicators that revealed social status. Instead, the classical adaptation of the actress's body did not reveal any trace of class. Similarly, Faulk describes how these actresses were transformed into something different, "[t]hey are about to change from working-class women into something more ethereal, if artificial... working-class women are transfigured into classical bodies in the space of the halls" (165). On the other hand, the imagery of sexual availability and public display of semi-nude bodies caused ambiguous reactions in the audience. Partly for disturbing the respectable members of the audience, but mainly because people were uncertain where to draw the line between aesthetic beauty and art, and eroticised entertainment. As Brenda Assael affirms:

> Cultural factors also complicated any attempt to regulate living statuary on the London stage; supporters could inscribe *tableaux vivants* with aesthetic registers, allowing them to be claimed for respectability rather than immorality –to be upheld as art rather than obscenity. Contemporaries, unable to discern whether what they were viewing was "nude" or "naked," ultimately concluded that prohibition was in-appropriate. The case of the *tableaux vivants* therefore reveals the resilience of understandings of popular culture that do not fit easily into established narratives of improvement, regulation, and modernization. (745)

*Tableaux vivants* was rather part of popular culture and circumscribed by cultural factors linked to an entertainment space as the music hall, which was not guided by the moral compass of purity groups. I have earlier pointed out that the music hall audience acquired a cross-class profile as the century evolved. Thus, the *tableaux vivants* were perceived in positive terms since it acculturated its working-class audience by familiarising them with high art, and simultaneously promoted popular culture as a respectable entertainment form by making allusion artistic value recurring to the classics. Despite attempts to regulate the *tableaux vivants,* "[t]he LCC ultimately decided that anxieties surrounding *tableaux vivants* were more effectively addressed by self-regulation and recommendation rather than by legal sanction" (Assael 743-44).

The acting profession increased in popularity in the late-Victorian era, and considering the professional limitations for women, one of the few ways to gain economic independence that did not involve service to others was to become an actress. As Jackson highlights, the "music hall did not guarantee a regular income; but it potentially provide a form of emancipation for some female artists" (65). Another critic notices that the acting profession "was an area of special dispensation from normal categories, moral and social, that defined woman's place" (Kent 94). However, the actress was not completely free from particular arrangements and codes that regulated her social status. Marriage was one of the strategies to protect the actress's reputation. Yet, if married outside the theatre, the actress was expected to leave the stage, whereas, if married to a man who was involved in the theatrical business she would continue acting. That way, some female performers used the title Mrs to acquire married status and in doing so get rid of the social stigma of a public woman. Other Victorian actresses used marriage as a strategy to protect their reputation and have the opportunity to work in the public sphere since "*the idea* of marriage neutralized her power and independence" (Powell 18; emphasis added). Nevertheless, certain facts suggest that this was not always the case. In the United States the use of the title Mrs guaranteed a marital status, which would preserve reputation and respectability, while people saw it differently in Europe. In England, most actresses continued to be promoted as Miss because it enhanced her availability. The famous burlesque actress Lydia Thompson, was billed with her maiden name and first announced as Mrs. Henderson when she went touring in America (Monrós Gaspar 175). Conversely, in England "the married actress often continued to be billed as 'Miss_____' because there was felt to be a greater drawing power in the appearance of 'availability' in the actress" (kent 105). However, these

actresses were also greatly admired by audiences from different classes, both by peers and by members of superior social groups.

In fact, there were manifold respectable actresses, such as Miss Faucit, Caroline Hearth or Jenny Lind, just to mention a few. Miss Faucit, who later married into Lady Martin, was a leading actress of her time and said to be highly regarded by George Eliot, and Caroline Hearth was appointed reader to the queen (Kent 99-100). Jenny Lind, also known as the Swedish Nightingale, was an opera singer who caused sensation in Britain in the 1840s. Although these three actresses were performers of the respectable stage and not popular theatre, their respectability pinpoints the overgeneralisation of actresses as prostitutes. In a similar vein, I propose that the music-hall actress was likely to be respected by the members of her class especially due to the fact that the popular audience held different values of sexual conduct. At the end of the nineteenth-century many young women from all classes of society were seeking to accomplish a stage career. The acting profession was attaining an improved social status and the increasing number of women working as actresses testifies to this.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to dissociate the Victorian actress from the prostitute arguing that the parallel between these two public women is an immoderate identification that is bound to class perceptions. I have claimed that the concern for respectability was one of the driving factors behind the association between women working within the world of spectacle and fallen women. The music hall was under constant attacks by purity groups throughout the nineteenth century and the music-hall actress was accused of being indecent and vulgar. This moral anxiety was anchored in Victorian ideals of respectability associated with middle-class aspirations to distinguish themselves from the less respectable and immoral behaviour of the working classes (Huggins 177-78). Throughout this essay, I have questioned the applicability of middle-class ideals of respectability to music-hall culture arguing that the public/private dichotomy was class-bound and unstable. As demonstrated above, the late-Victorian attempts by purity groups to censor and sanction the London music halls did not receive the support they had expected; the LCC recommended self-regulation rather than legal sanction (Assael 744) and "the 1885 attacks by purity groups on London music halls were ridiculed by some newspapers across Britain" (Huggins 188). The working classes had their proper set of values and views on respectability and, as Mike Huggins sustains: "respectability depended on the clientele" (187). The Victorian music hall was a liminal entertainment venue which mirrored the mindset of the time, and managed to remain a working-class culture albeit outside pressure from the bourgeoisie to make it more respectable. This particular entertainment institution aimed at producing leisure for the masses, and turned into a social site of subversion and destabilisation of the ideals imposed by the middle-classes. As a result, the music-hall stage provided a social space of negotiation of women's access to the public sphere.

By taking a closer look at the music-hall actress I have proved how female performers could claim both independence and self-sufficiency trough their presence in the public sphere. First, and foremost, as professional artists making their voice heard on stage where they could publicly subvert and comment on the social ideals of femininity. This was epitomised through acts of performance by staging both female stereotypes and male impersonations accompanied by comic songs with double entendre. Hence, the music-hall mockery of middle-class ideology and their correspondent gender views reveal not only its artificiality but also the working-class' awareness of it. Therefore, the music-hall actress reversed the domestic ideal by appropriating a female space within the public sphere where she was able to claim her presence and gain a voice. In other words, she subverted the public/private dichotomy and publicly challenged gendered roles and their respective spheres. Whether an active actress or a static *tableaux vivant* model, these female professionals defied these gender roles one way or the other. When taking the centre stage to act, sing or display their bodies, these women appropriated a female space within the public and contested the strict moral codes. By incorporating working-class understanding of gender roles and perception of sexual behaviour I have altered the middle-class view and oriented the nineteenth-century actress towards a new focal point. The combination of these findings and a shift of viewpoint support the idea that the identification of the actress as a prostitute is an overgeneralisation. Even though both professions bore the social stigma of being public women with a questionable morality, the social status of the actress differed from the prostitute. On stage the actress addressed an audience who through a cultural knowingness defied normativity that did not suit the conditions and standards of their class. The world of spectacle provided a space where the actress could openly comment on her social role and economic dependency in an attempt to define make meaning of her own role in society. Thereby, instead of being interpreted in terms of a fallen woman, the music-hall actress should be understood as a public figure who used the music-hall stage to negotiate female subjectivity and subvert the public/private dichotomy.

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