

LIVES OF SHAKESPEARIAN ACTORS

# Lives of Shakespearian Actors IV

Lucia Elizabeth Vestris

Edited by  
Janice Norwood



ROUTLEDGE  


## LIVES OF SHAKESPEARIAN ACTORS IV

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VOLUME EDITORS: CHRISTY DESMET  
JANICE NORWOOD  
KATHERINE NEWEY

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LIVES OF SHAKESPEARIAN ACTORS IV

HELEN FAUCIT, LUCIA ELIZABETH VESTRIS AND FANNY KEMBLE  
BY THEIR CONTEMPORARIES

VOLUME

2

LUCIA ELIZABETH VESTRIS

EDITED BY  
JANICE NORWOOD



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## INTRODUCTION

Had a contemporary of Madame Vestris (the professional name by which she was most commonly known) been asked for what posterity would remember her it is highly doubtful that the answer would have been her Shakespearian productions. Such an idea might have been thought perverse and indeed none of the obituaries in the major newspapers and journals make any reference to them. Instead it is likely that either her burlesque performances, her shapely legs, her scandalous private life, her management of the Olympic Theatre, her marriage to Charles Mathews or a combination of these would have been cited as her chief claims to fame. While these features still merit attention, they have more recently been joined by critical interest in the two plays of Shakespeare put on during her management of the Theatre Royal Covent Garden. It is obvious therefore that Vestris's Shakespearian productions cannot be viewed in isolation, hence this volume presents them in the context of her personal reputation and her complete acting and managerial career.

### *Key Personal and Professional Events*

Vestris was born Lucia Elizabeth Bartolozzi in London on 2 March 1797. The oldest child in a cosmopolitan, artistic family, she was the daughter of Gaëtano Bartolozzi, an engraver and print-seller, and the granddaughter of Francisco Bartolozzi, the celebrated Italian engraver employed by George III. Her German mother, Therese Jansen, was an accomplished pianist for whom Haydn had dedicated three sonatas. A sibling, Josephine, who would later follow her older sister on to the stage, was born in 1807.

Lucia had singing lessons with Domenico Corri, voice instructor at the King's Theatre (otherwise known as the Italian Opera House). It may have been through Corri that she met Armand Vestris (1787–1825), who was descended from a successful line of Italian ballet dancers. His father, Auguste, was the pre-eminent dancer at the Paris Opéra, where he earned the sobriquet of 'God of the Dance'. Armand was the leading dancer at the King's Theatre and in 1813 at the age of just fifteen Lucia married him. The following year he was promoted to ballet-master at the theatre.

At Armand Vestris's benefit at the King's Theatre on 20 July 1815 his wife Lucia made her professional stage debut. Billed as Madame Vestris, she sung Proserpina in Peter von Winter's opera *Il Ratto di Proserpina*. Her contralto voice and physical beauty inspired favourable reviews. Encouraged by this, she repeated the performance many times that season and went

on to sing three more operatic roles in the following one. In December 1816 Vestris performed Proserpina at the Théâtre des Italiens in Paris. At some point after this her husband moved to Italy, leaving his wife in the French capital, and the couple were not reunited before his early death in 1825.

Vestris returned to England in late 1819 and commenced her acting career at Drury Lane under the management of Robert Elliston. Her first major success was in the cross-dressed role of Giovanni in William Moncrieff's *Giovanni in London*, a burlesque of Mozart's opera. The sexual ambivalence of Vestris's Giovanni served to fuel intense interest and speculation (some of it pornographic) about her private life. Over the next decade she established herself on the British stage, appearing in productions at Drury Lane, the King's Theatre, the Haymarket, Covent Garden, the Tottenham Street Theatre and the provinces as well as in concerts at Vauxhall Gardens. She also popularized a number of songs, the most famous of which, 'Cherry Ripe', she first sang in John Poole's *Paul Pry* in 1825.

In December 1830 a new phase of Vestris's career began when she leased the small Olympic Theatre in Wych Street. In some ways this seemed a regressive step as the theatre was unfashionable and licensed only for burlettas. Nevertheless the move gave her autonomy and the opportunity to play the kinds of part that particularly suited her. She immediately instigated a series of renovations that transformed the dingy appearance of the venue in an attempt to attract a more refined audience. Equally judiciously she surrounded herself with talented people including James Robinson Planché, with whom she was to build a fruitful association that lasted until the end of her working life. At the Olympic Planché wrote (or co-wrote) many of the most popular pieces, including a series of classically themed and fairy burlesques starting in January 1831 with *Olympic Revels, or Prometheus and Pandora*. He also advised on costumes and sets. Another important addition to the Olympic's regular company joined in 1835, the comic actor Charles James Mathews, the son of the famous protean performer Charles Mathews.

Although the Olympic endeavour saw many successful productions, Vestris struggled financially. In July 1838 she married Mathews prior to undertaking a tour of America with him. Planché was left in charge of the Olympic in their absence. The transatlantic trip proved a disappointment in terms of both audience reception and revenue. Vestris and Mathews returned to the Olympic where they completed their final season on 31 May 1839. This was not the end of her managerial ambitions and within two months Mathews had become lessee of Covent Garden with his wife as manager. Once again Vestris refurbished her new auditorium. For the first time she was able to mount legitimate drama and chose to open with a production of *Love's Labour's Lost*. In addition to Shakespeare, the repertoire included classic comedies such as Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*, extravaganzas such as *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Beauty and the Beast*, new plays including Dion Boucicault's *London Assurance* and Sheridan Knowles's *Love*, as well as a six-night engagement of the veteran actor Charles Kemble. The management lasted for three seasons. Despite taking more receipts than their predecessor – Macready – had managed at the theatre, but with huge overheads, debts continued to mount, making it possible for Charles Kemble to force them out in 1842 over rent arrears. All of their invaluable scenery and wardrobe was also forfeited. On the eve of the final performance the

*Morning Post* published a glowing assessment of Vestris's achievements at Covent Garden. It praises her for banishing vulgarity and replacing it with refinement and also for her 'fine taste' in scenic art: 'The *mise en scene* was never perfect, or in good keeping, until Madame Vestris taught her painters how to execute, and the public how to appreciate, her own pictorial conceptions; and to her judgment in this way the play going world has been indebted for much of its theatrical enjoyment.'<sup>1</sup>

Provincial touring and an uncomfortable engagement under Macready followed the end of the Covent Garden years (see below). Vestris's final managerial project was at the Lyceum, which she and Mathews took over in 1847. Once again they had some notable successes including J. M. Morton's farce *Box and Cox*, Planché's spectacular *The Island of Jewels* and the same author's translated drama *The Day of Reckoning*, in which the acting reached a new level of realism according to G. H. Lewes (below, p. 258). Many of the plays were adaptations of French plays. Nevertheless, profits still proved elusive. This concluding period of Vestris's life was characterized by a gradual fading away from public consciousness. Ill-health meant she performed infrequently in the 1850s. Her final appearance was at Charles Mathews's benefit on 26 July 1854 when she played in *Sunshine through the Clouds*. Thereafter, debilitated by cancer and constantly beset by monetary worries, she was confined to her home in Fulham. In her last months she was deprived of the support of her husband's presence as their precarious finances forced him to undertake a provincial tour and, while at Preston, he was imprisoned for debt. He returned a couple of days before her death. She died on 8 August 1856 at the age of fifty-nine. Her funeral was a private affair and she was buried at Kensal Green cemetery.

### *Biographical Treatments*

The first biographies of Vestris began to appear when she was still a young woman. *La Belle Assemblée* published a short resumé of her life and career in July 1820. A much more substantial treatment appeared in *Oxberry's Dramatic Biography* six years later. Like many of the subsequent memoirs, it tended to dwell on her private, rather than her professional, life.

Contemporary interest in Vestris at this time was often prurient and based on hearsay. Under the guise of censure, much of the material written about her had the clear intention of titillating its audience. This is especially true of the series of *Memoirs* that were purportedly about Vestris and were used to regurgitate many unsubstantiated stories. They relied heavily on identifying her putative lovers and associates by initials, such as Lord P (for Lord Peter-sham). This partial obscurity served the double function of allowing those acquainted with the London 'in set' to congratulate themselves on the insider knowledge that enabled them to recognize the parties involved while also making it less likely that the publishers would be sued for libel. In fact, although Vestris's gentlemen 'friends' were sometimes portrayed as gullible victims of a cynical adventurer they still gained a cachet by being associated with her as conquests. The damage to their reputations was thus much less severe than it was to that of their alleged lover. Regardless of how many of the arrangements were true, Vestris was undeniably tarnished in the public eye. One of her obituaries claims that 'jealousy had no small share' in the attacks

upon her: 'It is well known that in the eyes of the mean-spirited there is nothing so criminal as success, and we regret to say that in the theatrical profession the truth of this axiom is too frequently elucidated.'<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, although some of the stories of her monetary transactions are unsubstantiated, surviving correspondence between Vestris and Montague Gore shows that she received considerable annuities from him.<sup>3</sup> Although he was clearly infatuated with her, her letters do not reveal reciprocal amatory feelings. The situation was not improved when she was in love, most notoriously in the case of her affair with the married 'Lord' Edward Thynne. Thomas Duncombe, the son of a longtime associate and admirer of Vestris, reproduces two letters that show Vestris in a negative light pleading for money because of her involvement with the reckless Thynne (below, pp. 230–7).

Stories about Vestris accepting money from men proved particularly damaging because they seemed to substantiate the long-held perception of the association between the actress and the prostitute. *Oxberry's Dramatic Biography* charges that a woman who 'makes a sale of those pleasures ... reduces herself to the level of a prostitute' (below, p. 54). The author takes exception to her mercenary motives:

Madame Vestris has done more to degrade her profession, by suffering the impression to be abroad that she could be bought, than the talents of fifty such actresses could remedy ... Had the lady of whom it is our unpleasing task thus to speak, erred from the feelings of nature – had she even emulated Catherine in the number of her lovers – as long as passion had been her only incentive, we should have closed our pages to her errors, and cast a sigh, but no reproach, over her frailties.<sup>4</sup>

For some observers, Vestris's cross-dressing roles served to reinforce her link with prostitution.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the various scandals and continual title-tattle ensured that Vestris was constantly spoken about. The publicity may therefore have added to her box-office appeal.

Perhaps in response to the persistent attacks on the actress, Vestris also inspired a string of poetic eulogies from her supporters. Often written in indifferent verse, these endorsements were disseminated in a range of journals and some penny ballads. Typical examples are provided by Sir Lumley Skeffington and the *Dramatic Magazine* (below, pp. 81 and 248).

Vestris left very little in her own words; she did not write an autobiography and if she kept a journal, it has not survived. Much of the extant private correspondence concerns practical arrangements and gives little insight into her emotional life.<sup>6</sup> However, we can get some impression of her character in a series of incidents where she felt it necessary to make her views public or to defend herself, such as when she made an affidavit about her life when engaged in legal action over Duncombe's book in 1826 (below, p. 21). The various court cases arising out of her financial problems also reveal her habits. Mathews was able to make comic capital out of her well-known extravagance when he appeared in a bankruptcy court in 1844.<sup>7</sup>

The number of addresses spoken directly to the audience in Vestris's productions suggests her off- and on-stage personas were often conflated. This is most evident in the concluding sections of the annual burlesques at the Olympic, beginning with *Olympic Revels* in 1831 and in *The Drama's Levée, or A Peep at the Past*, which Planché wrote as a final production before

Vestris and Mathews set off for their American tour in 1838. In the latter piece Vestris plays the allegorical Praise, 'an old friend of the Drama' until the final scene, in which she appears as herself. This concludes with a solo in which she avers that 'Go where I will, my grateful heart / Shall in old England stay.'<sup>8</sup>

In the address John Hamilton Reynolds wrote for Vestris to speak on the opening night of her management of the Olympic Theatre in 1831, he claims she is 'The first of all dramatic Joan of Arcs' and that she is 'The first that ever led a company' (below, p. 166). Although this was not strictly true, her tenure can be seen as pioneering.<sup>9</sup> Contemporary reports do not express alarm at the idea of a female impresario, but sexist attitudes predominate in responses to Vestris's performances. Many dwell on her looks and there are frequent references to her age, the implication being that audience satisfaction must decline once she is no longer nubile. The existence of a sexual double standard is clear when *Figaro in London* describes her as 'old' at thirty-six years (below, p. 253) in the same decade as Charles Kemble, then in his fifties was still playing Romeo.

After her death, no full-scale biography of Vestris was published until 1923. Charles E. Pearce's *Madame Vestris and Her Times* devotes much space to the scandals surrounding her, but also claims her importance to the dramatic profession. The following decade Leo Waitzkin produced a book about Vestris's managerial innovations, *The Witch of Wych Street: A Study of the Theatrical Reforms of Madame Vestris*. Given that there were no further books dedicated to Vestris for another four decades, it is ironic that two biographies were published within six months, William W. Appleton's *Madame Vestris and the London Stage* and Clifford John Williams's *Madame Vestris – a Theatrical Biography*. Since then the rise of feminist theatre historiography has led to a reclamation of Vestris, most importantly in the work of Jane Moody and in Elizabeth Schafer's *Ms-Directing Shakespeare: Women Direct Shakespeare*. Moody makes the case that although Vestris had hitherto not been regarded as a dramatist, she should rightly be seen as 'author' of many of the productions under her management. Schafer considers her as a pioneering woman director. She shows how an emphasis on Vestris's domesticity has been used to her detriment: by dismissing her as 'tasteful' and 'considerate' commentators have ignored her more radical achievements. Other critics have concentrated on her cross-dressing activities and have written on her performances in relation to gender theory. Yet interestingly nobody has shown much concern with her acting.

### *Vestris as an Actress*

Many nineteenth-century assessments of her acting stress her limitations. She is frequently praised for qualities in her persona and her style, rather than her histrionic skill. A number of factors may have contributed to Vestris's limited acting competence. Firstly, it is significant that she came to fame as an opera singer. Thus she did not have the opportunity to perfect her acting technique in anonymous small parts as her name was already known by the time she came to perform in plays. Commenting retrospectively on the 'humble' nature of her talents in her debut season, a writer for *The British Stage, and Literary Cabinet* enumerates her defects:

Her voice by no means possessed the richness and volume which it has since acquired; and her acting was still less admirable, being limited to crossing her arms gracefully upon her bosom, looking like a pretty piece of still life, or giving an occasional gentle wave of her right hand during the execution of a song.<sup>10</sup>

This is contrasted with her prowess just five years later:

Her voice, which is a *contr'alto*, is become much more rich, mellow, and powerful; and she has evidently made music her study, greatly to her advantage. Her acting is till more strikingly amended; the timidity which formed so great a drawback upon the effect of her early exertions, has entirely vanished; and no actress of twenty years' standing upon the Stage, is more perfectly free and unembarrassed in her manner than is Madame Vestris. This confidence, not to say boldness, of demeanour, is of advantage to her in male parts, but it detracts from the charm of her female personations.<sup>11</sup>

The evident refining of her performing proficiency would seem to be the result of experience rather than a deliberate strategy. Managers like Robert Elliston and Alfred Bunn employed her as a commercial investment and showed more interest in cashing in on her notoriety and established skills than in further developing her talent. Because they cast her in certain types of role (in particular breeches roles), there was an expectation about the kind of parts she could play. Williams suggests this was one of the reasons for her poor reception in America; her reputation preceded her as a performer of breeches roles and the American public was unwilling to accept her in different parts.<sup>12</sup> Vestris soon tired of the cross-dressed burlesque parts, but she clearly did have an aptitude for them. One contemporary critic argues that she was ill-suited to Italian opera because of the 'subdued style of acting' it required. Instead, "The effrontery, slang, feathers, and switch, of *Don Giovanni* suit her far better."<sup>13</sup>

Although she performed with a few of the most prestigious performers of the age, such as Edmund Kean, Samuel Phelps and William Macready, they made relatively little comment about her acting. This may have been because they did not consider it worthy of note. Moreover some members of the profession actively hindered her career. For example, Charles Kemble effectively brought about the end of her Covent Garden management by revoking her tenancy over non-payment of rent so that he could profit more from his daughter Adelaide's success. Likewise, William Macready, who held strong views on the cultural value of Shakespeare and the 'higher' drama and saw himself as the legitimate upholder of the national stage, was jealousy of her success, regarding her as a dreadful upstart.

In his brief diary entries Macready dismisses his competition without recognizing her particular talents. For example, on 10 June 1833 he succinctly notes of her performance at his benefit: 'Vestris pointless and vulgar.'<sup>14</sup> His contempt for Vestris and Mathews is clear when on 13 September 1840 he comments of their assumption of the management of Covent Garden: 'It is not a fitting spectacle – the national drama in the hands of Mrs. Vestris and Mr. Charles Mathews!'<sup>15</sup> By his own admission, when that endeavour failed he engaged them at Drury Lane in 1842 as a means of 'enfeebling an opposition as well as adding to my own strength'.<sup>16</sup> In the light of this barely concealed disdain and his refusal to cast Vestris in major roles, it is not surprising that their working relationship became intolerable, resulting in a verbal con-

frontation on 5 November. Macready records that Mathews intimated he wished to speak to him: ‘Madame Vestris followed him into my room and began a *scene* which lasted two or three hours – on the lady’s part much “Billingsgate” and false assertion, on his much weakness and equivocation.’<sup>17</sup> He clearly sees Vestris’s behaviour as unbecoming for a woman and implies that Mathews is unmanly.

Macready was not the only person to record Vestris’s conduct as an employee in an unflattering light. Manager John Ebers, for whom she intermittently worked at the King’s Theatre between 1821 and 1828, recalls her insisting upon her entitlements:

A prima donna is entitled to a separate dressing-room, with a sofa, and two wax-candles. The same principle obtains with the chief male performers, and with the first and second dancers of both sexes. Ludicrous as it may seem, these marks of precedency are insisted upon with the greatest exactness. Madame Vestris went beyond all others, and furnished herself with two additional candles; and one night, there not being, by some inadvertency, candles enough in the house, she stood on the stage behind the curtain, and refused to dress for her part until the required number of lights was obtained.<sup>18</sup>

Vestris’s behaviour is perhaps no different to that of other opera singers, but she certainly does appear to have been quick to react to any perceived slights to her standing. At times she even sought to present her side of the story through letters to newspapers, as she did in 1827 (below, p. 207). To counter this impression, we should acknowledge that despite her occasionally volatile behaviour she did inspire loyalty from those employed in her companies. Also, she treated them well. For example, she abandoned the unpredictable benefit system and paid her actors a week’s salary at the beginning of the first season at the Olympic.

### *Shakespearian Roles and Productions*

Professional jealousy, as shown by Macready, may be partially responsible for Vestris’s limited Shakespearian repertoire, but there were other factors. During her tenure at the Olympic Theatre her burletta licence did not permit her to produce Shakespeare and at Covent Garden she was constrained by the composition of the company, not having any heavyweight tragedians. In addition, her racy reputation rendered certain roles inappropriate for her. It is difficult to see how an audience would have accepted her as a plausible romantic naïf such as Hero or Juliet. Yet in 1822 she successfully assayed Ophelia to Charles Mayne Young’s Hamlet at Drury Lane. *The Times* concedes her performance is better than expected (below, p. 263) while the *Theatrical Observer* reports: ‘she was every thing that could be wished for – most interesting in look, demeanour, and voice – she was greatly applauded.’<sup>19</sup> Her portrayal of Ophelia was again praised as ‘a pleasing and effective piece of acting’ when she repeated the role opposite Edmund Kean at Drury Lane in 1824.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately in reviews of Shakespearian productions in which Vestris appeared, she usually receives only a one-line commentary, if she is mentioned at all. For example, the *Morning Post* reviewed her performance of Rosalind in an operatic version of *As You Like It* at the Haymarket in 1825 and notes simply: ‘Madame Vestris played Rosalind with much sportiveness.’<sup>21</sup> The *Age*, though equally brief, was much less complimentary: ‘Madame Vestris cannot play

Shakespeare because she cannot comprehend Shakespeare – and those who saw her Rosamond must confess this.<sup>22</sup> It is difficult to get an accurate conception of her performance from such limited and contradictory comments.

It was perhaps inevitable that given her operatic background she would excel in musical versions of Shakespeare and in fact the Shakspearian play in which she most often performed was an operatic version of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The music was written by Reynolds and arranged by Bishop. Vestris first appeared as Mrs Page at Drury Lane in 1824, singing ‘in her best style’,<sup>23</sup> then as Mrs Ford at the Haymarket later in the same year. Over the years she reprised the role of Mrs Page many times at Covent Garden, the Haymarket and the Lyceum. When she put on the piece during her management of Covent Garden from 30 April 1840 the production was widely praised for its *mise en scene* although the critic writing in *John Bull* is contemptuous of the decision to dress it in Elizabethan costume.<sup>24</sup> Mathews’s portrayal of Slender is singled out for particular commendation as are the eponymous wives, played by Vestris and Mrs Nisbett. Of the former, the *Morning Post* remarks:

Madame VESTRIS looked as young as her daughter (MISS RAINFORTH) and put on a very pretty air of astonishment when she wondered what ‘unweighed behaviour’ *Falstaff* could have picked out of her conversation that he presumed to write her a love-letter. She sang exquisitely the various little airs which are interspersed through her part.<sup>25</sup>

Vestris also appeared in two other operatic versions of Shakespeare under Elliston’s management of Drury Lane. She was Ariel to Macready’s Prospero in *The Tempest* and Luciana in *The Comedy of Errors*.

However, it is for none of these performances that Vestris’s contribution to nineteenth-century Shakspearian practice is judged, but for two comedies she produced at Covent Garden: *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, which opened on 30 September 1839, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, first played on 16 November 1840. Assessed purely by the number of performances and revivals and the revenue they added to the theatre’s coffers, neither production was particularly successful. *Love’s Labours Lost* ran for just nine nights while *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* appeared on fifty-nine occasions in the 1840–1 season (making it the most performed production that season) and eleven in the following one.<sup>26</sup>

The act of directing Shakespeare could be regarded as a bold move by an actress previously associated with burlesques and light drama. In presenting legitimate drama with the highest cultural prestige, she announced herself as a serious manager of one of the patent theatres. Vestris left no accounts of the reasoning behind her choice of these particular Shakspearian plays. In the case of this frustrating silence, we are forced to speculate. The selection of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* was an unusual one given that it had not been performed since the closure of the theatres in 1642. Possibly she reasoned that a neglected play would attract the usual Shakespeare audience out of curiosity. Alternatively, she may have thought that audience expectation would not be so great because the comedy was so little known. Other critics have suggested that it was chosen to suit the talents of the company Vestris and Mathews had contracted, one that lacked major dramatic performers of Kean, Phelps or Macready’s ilk.<sup>27</sup> Whatever the reason, the part

of Rosaline offered Vestris a chance to play a role that had some relation to her own position. In the play, Berowne and his friends consistently view Rosaline and the other French women as harlots and enchantresses. The audience, however, can see that this is not the case. Thus there are clear parallels with Vestris's own reputation.

The production had an unfortunate reception from the audience that was unrelated to its artistic merit. As part of her refurbishment of Covent Garden Vestris had abolished the one-shilling gallery, raising the price to eighteen pennies. Angered by this, a section of the large crowd prevented Vestris from giving her opening address by vociferous objections. Order was re-established only once Mathews had agreed to reinstate the old pricing. After this inauspicious beginning the play was allowed to continue. The critical response to the production was varied, condemned as 'an utter failure' in the *Examiner* (below, p. 268) and conversely praised in the *Theatrical Observer* as 'beautifully performed' and presented in an 'attractive manner'.<sup>28</sup> Vestris earned some praise for her performance: 'she represents the merry hearted girl in a style of grace and bewitching archness that can be appreciated only when seen.'<sup>29</sup> A number of reviewers appreciated the attention to detail shown in the scenery, costumes and pageantry. Miriam Gilbert argues that in creating an extravagant ending with a pageant and songs, Vestris created a 'sense of closure' and 'the "happy ending" that Shakespeare has not written'.<sup>30</sup>

It was this kind of elaborate spectacle that was to be so important in Vestris's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It featured a panorama, magical transformations and evocative scenery. Painted by the talented Grieve family (John Henderson Grieve and his sons Thomas and William), this depicted forest glades, a fairy lake, moonlit landscapes and a view of Athens. The technique that Grieve had developed at Covent Garden of building up layers of transparent glazes enabled him to create images of great subtlety and depth.<sup>31</sup> The mood of the production was further enhanced by the music of Mendelssohn and graceful dances choreographed by Oscar Byrne. These elements of the staging were highly praised in many of the reviews, but the acting received a more mixed response. Vestris played Oberon in a manner that delighted the critic of the *Sunday Times*:

Madame Vestris performed, or rather became, Oberon, for her identification with the fairy creation of Shakspeare [*sic*] could scarcely be called a 'performance,' so perfectly did she become the very spirit of the poet's imagination; nothing could be more aerial, more graceful, more perfect, than her appearance. Her delivery of the beautiful language of the play was equally felicitous; her intonation, her emphasis, and her gestures were full of sweetness, eloquence, and dignity. She sang with almost more than her accustomed taste and judgment. In the duet, 'I know a bank whereon the wild thyme grows,' with the First Fairy (Miss Rainforth), she was encored, and the audience had the satisfaction of a repetition of one of the most beautiful pieces of vocal harmony ever sung. We never saw this most fascinating actress to greater advantage than in the character of Oberon. She was perfect in the music, the elocution, the *tout ensemble* of her part.<sup>32</sup>

Gary Jay Williams claims that her decision to play this male part set a precedent for all subsequent English and American productions until 1914.<sup>33</sup> Although the text was cut, Vestris's interpretation featured more of Shakespeare's original than was customary. The production has now been reclaimed as an important milestone in the performance history of the play, with Tre-

vor Griffiths describing Vestris's contribution as 'massive'.<sup>34</sup> Schafer contends Vestris 'produced a distinctly feminized version of Shakespeare' and notes that in her production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* all the principal fairy parts, including Puck, were played by women.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to these two major productions in which Vestris herself appeared, she also put on a few other Shakespearian plays. In January 1840 Moore, an actor making his London debut, was cast as *Hamlet* but was not a success. In March there was an equally unfortunate production of *Romeo and Juliet* featuring James Anderson and Jane Mordaunt as the lovers. It had an elaborate, historically accurate set.<sup>36</sup> The acting was roundly criticized: 'Mr. Anderson's Romeo was a performance anything more wretchedly absurd than which we never, in all our yet experience of incapacity, beheld'.<sup>37</sup> Mordaunt, the sister of Mrs Nisbett, was judged 'utterly incapable of even second-rate tragic characters' and failed so miserably that she was replaced after two performances with Emmeline Montague.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, in May Ellen Tree played Olivia in a lacklustre production of *Twelfth Night*. The complaint in this review is typical of views expressed about all these productions:

As far as the dresses and scenery go the management cannot be too highly praised, but there was upon the part of the actors a lack of anything that could be called sustained or continuous talent that rendered the performance of this truly brilliant comedy far, very far, from what it should be.<sup>39</sup>

This highlights the problem that dogged Vestris throughout her time at Covent Garden: performances could only be as good as the actors, and the company that Vestris employed did not have the full range of talents required. Despite this, her management had many creditable points. Planché was the first to draw attention to the managerial reforms she instituted (below, p. 161). Alan Fischler notes how genuinely innovative she was and reclaims some of the reforms that have been incorrectly attributed to others. He claims that her innovative scenic realism predated and influenced that of Tom Robertson while her style of comic acting was a precursor to that often credited to W. S. Gilbert later in the nineteenth century. The frequently cited first use of the box set in *The Conquering Game* has now been discredited, yet at the very least Vestris did popularize the innovation.<sup>40</sup> Ernest Bradlee Watson unequivocally states the importance of Vestris right from her Olympic reign: 'Thus began most unpretentiously a revolution in stage art more considerable and far-reaching than anything attempted by Kemble, Kean, or Macready.'<sup>41</sup>

### *Career Appraisal*

Vestris appears to have been something of an anomaly to contemporary critics. Though her fame meant she merited attention, her individual talents when analysed were flawed. In her obituary in the *Athenaeum* (which was printed verbatim in *Dwight's Journal of Music*, below, p. 299), she is ranked as a 'second table' comic actress, being 'inapprehensive in dialogue, flat in repartee, slow in conceiving character, as apart from *costume*, – and hence not to be remembered by any comic creation or impersonation.'<sup>42</sup> Yet despite a disparaging assessment of some of her performance skills, the critic concedes her mastery of others:

Without having mastered the singer's art, she charmed by her singing – the parts that she could not act she dressed superbly. She was unequal to the utterance of Shakspeare's poetical fancies – not elegant enough for Congreve – not sufficiently piquant for Sheridan, – but in *extravaganzas*, burlesques, musical farces, she was so accomplished, sprightly and graceful, that the charm by which she held her public was hardly felt to be third-rate while she was in presence.<sup>43</sup>

This sense of Vestris being more than the sum of her parts characterizes many of the reviews, memoirs and retrospective assessments. Her talent may be difficult to analyze, but the allure of Vestris continues to fascinate.

#### Notes:

1. *Morning Post*, 29 April 1842, p. 5.
2. *Daily News* (11 August 1856).
3. See C. E. Pearce, *Madame Vestris and Her Times* (London: Stanley Paul, 1923), pp. 190–205.
4. This passage is reprinted verbatim in *The Daughters of Thespis; or, A Peep Behind the Curtain!* (London: Jackson & Co., 1841), p. 108. The volume was published anonymously but was the work of Charles Henry Cook, who took the pseudonym John Bickerdyke.
5. See review of *Little Pickle* in *British Stage and Literary Cabinet*, 5:49 (January 1821), p. 14.
6. Pearce devotes a chapter to 'Madame's Characteristic Letters', in Pearce, *Madame Vestris*, pp. 190–205.
7. *The Times*, 28 February 1844, p. 7.
8. *The Extravaganzas of J. R. Planché, Esq., (Somerset Herald) 1825–1871*, ed. T. F. Dillon Croker and S. Tucker, 2 vols (London: Samuel French 1879), vol. 2, p. 29.
9. Rosamond Gilder cites earlier female lessees; *Enter the Actress: The First Women in the Theatre* (London: George G. Harrap, 1931), p. 259.
10. *The British Stage, and Literary Cabinet*, 5:49 (January 1821), p. 2. This is repeated verbatim in *Oxberry's Dramatic Bibliography*, below, p. 48.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
12. C. J. Williams, *Madame Vestris – a Theatrical Biography* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1973), p. 134.
13. *The British Stage, and Literary Cabinet*, 5:52 (April 1821), p. 106.
14. *The Diaries of William Charles Macready 1833–1851*, ed. W. Toynbee, 2 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1912), vol.1, p. 42.
15. *Ibid.*, vol.2 p. 80.
16. Entry for 9 April 1840, *ibid.*, pp. 163–4.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
18. J. Ebers, *Seven Years of the King's Theatre* (London: William Harrison Ainsworth, 1828), pp. 371–2.
19. *Theatrical Observer*, 18 October 1822.
20. *Mirror of the Stage*, 8 March 1824, p. 41.
21. *Morning Post*, 26 May 1825.
22. Quoted in Pearce, *Madame Vestris*, p. 116; no reference given.
23. *Theatrical Observer*, 28 February 1824.
24. *John Bull*, 2 May 1840, p. 213.
25. *Morning Post*, 1 May 1840, p. 5.
26. Figures taken from *The Life of Charles James Mathews*, ed. C. Dickens, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1879), pp. 320–2.
27. For example, C. J. Williams, *Madame Vestris*, p. 155.
28. *Theatrical Observer*, 2 October 1839.
29. *Ibid.*

30. M. Gilbert, *Love's Labour's Lost: Shakespeare in Performance* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 29.
31. S. Crabtree and P. Beudert, *Scenic Art for the Theatre: History, Tools, and Techniques* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier, 1998), p. 264.
32. *Sunday Times*, 22 November 1840.
33. G. J. Williams, *Our Moonlight Revels: A Midsummer Night's Dream in the Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), p. 93.
34. T. Griffiths, 'A Neglected Pioneer Production: Madame Vestris' *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Covent Garden, 1840', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 30:3 (Summer 1979), p. 396.
35. E. Schafer, *Ms-Directing Shakespeare: Women Direct Shakespeare* (London: The Women's Press, 1998), pp. 194–200.
36. See W. A. Armstrong, 'Madame Vestris: A Centenary Appreciation', *Theatre Notebook*, 11:1 (October–December 1956), p. 15.
37. Unattributed cutting dated 22 March, Covent Garden January–June 1840 Production File, V&A Theatre Collection.
38. *Sunday Times*, 22 March 1840.
39. Unattributed cutting dated 16 May 1840, Covent Garden January–June 1840 Production File, V&A Theatre Collection.
40. For the claim see L. Waitzkin, *The Witch of Wych Street: a Study of the Theatrical Reforms of Madame Vestris* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), p. 22. For discussion of the box set see W. W. Appleton, *Madame Vestris and the London Stage* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp. 71–4.
41. E. B. Watson, *Sheridan to Robertson: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century London Stage* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1926), p. 192.
42. *Athenaeum*, 16 August 1856, p. 1020.
43. *Ibid.*

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## CHRONOLOGY

- 1797 (2 March) Lucia Elizabeth Bartolozzi born in London.
- 1813 (28 January) Bartolozzi marries Armand Vestris at St Martin's-in-the-Fields.
- 1815 (20 July) Under the name Madame Vestris, Vestris makes stage début as Proserpina in Peter von Winter's opera *Il Ratto di Proserpina* at King's Theatre, London.
- 1816 In 1816 season appears at King's Theatre in Winter's *Zaïre* and Martin y Soler's *Una Cosa Rara*, as Dorabella in Mozart's *Così fan tutte* and as Susanna in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. (7 December) Vestris appears as Proserpina at Théâtre des Italiens, Paris, billed as Bartolozzi-Vestris. Armand Vestris goes to Italy, leaving his wife in Paris.
- 1819 (September) Vestris returns to London and is engaged by Robert Elliston to perform at Drury Lane.
- 1820 (19 February) Vestris debuts at Drury Lane as Lilla in James Cobb's *The Siege of Belgrade*, followed by appearances as Adela in *The Haunted Tower*, the title role in Thomas Arne's *Artaxerxes* and Dolly Snip in *Shakespeare versus Harlequin*. (30 May) Vestris gives her first performance as Giovanni in William Moncrieff's burlesque *Giovanni in London*. (22 July) Vestris plays Macheath in Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* at the Haymarket. In the autumn Vestris appears at Drury Lane as Apollo in *Midas* and Little Pickle in *The Spoiled Child*.
- 1821 (March) In addition to her Drury Lane contract, Vestris negotiates a deal to perform opera at the King's Theatre under the management of John Ebers. This engagement continues for seven years, her first part being Pippo in Rossini's opera *La Gazza Ladra*. (18 August) Gaëtano Bartolozzi, Vestris's father, dies. (December) Vestris performs in the critically unsuccessful *Giovanni in Ireland*, which is cancelled after four performances.
- 1822 Public scandal as Vestris's sister Josephine claims her mother attempted to 'sell' her to Lord Petersham. Vestris herself has a liaison with Montague Gore. (August) Vestris performs at the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh. (17 October) Vestris makes her first appearance in a Shakespearian role, playing Ophelia to Charles Mayne Young's Hamlet at Drury Lane. (14 December) She plays Ophelia opposite Charles Kean's Hamlet for the first of three performances.
- 1823 (July) Vestris has a successful part in James Kenney's burletta *Sweethearts and Wives* at the Haymarket.
- 1824 (24 January) At King's Theatre Vestris sings Emma in Rossini's *Zelmira* accompanied by the composer on the pianoforte. (25 February) Vestris plays Mrs Page in a production of Bishop's/Reynold's opera version of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at Drury Lane. (28 May) For her benefit, Vestris chooses to play Ariel in *The Tempest* with Macready as Prospero. (1 June) For Miss Stephens's benefit at Drury Lane, Vestris appears as Luciana in Reynolds's version of *The Comedy of Errors*. (22 October) Vestris plays Mrs Ford in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at the Haymarket. She performs in Dublin.
- 1825 (17 May) Armand Vestris dies. (23 May) Vestris plays Rosalind in operatic version of *As You Like It* at the Haymarket. (13 September) Vestris plays Phoebe in John Poole's *Paul Pry*, in which she sings 'Cherry Ripe' for the first time.

- 1826 (12 April) Vestris plays Fatima in Carl Maria von Weber's opera *Oberon* at Covent Garden. (1 June) For her own benefit at Covent Garden, Vestris plays Mrs Page in Reynold's opera of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. (5 June) Vestris sings at a concert at Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, produced by Planché and co-starring John Braham, Sinclair, Miss Stephens and Miss Love. (30 September) *The Wasp* publishes a poem entitled 'Madame Vestris's Catalogue' about her amorous liaisons. (25 November) Vestris wins libel hearing before Court of the King's Bench and £100 damages after John Duncombe publishes *Memoirs of the Life, Public and Private Adventures of Madame Vestris*.
- 1827 (May) Vestris plays Lady Teazle in *The School for Scandal* at her benefit.
- 1829 Between London seasons Vestris undertakes a provincial tour with sister Josephine. Both sisters are engaged to appear at Drury Lane.
- 1830 (April) Vestris has acrimonious dispute with actor Joshua Anderson over his supporters hissing her performance in *The Beggar's Opera*. (1 June) Vestris again plays Mrs Page in Reynold's opera *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at Drury Lane. (November) Vestris begins short season at Tottenham Street Theatre having failed to get an engagement at the patent theatres. (6 December) Vestris leases the Olympic Theatre, London and obtains burletta licence.
- 1831 (3 January) Olympic Theatre opens with performances of W. H. Murray's *Mary Queen of Scots*, James Robinson Planché's *Olympic Revels*, in which Vestris performs as Pandora, *The Little Jockey* starring Maria Foote, and *Clarissa Harlowe* with Julia Glover. The season runs for twelve weeks. (January) A court case reveals that a modeller is selling plaster casts of Vestris's legs. (Summer) Vestris goes on a provincial tour accompanied by the monkey Jou-lou, who appears with her in T. H. Bayley's *The Grenadier*. (1 October) Second season opens at the newly refurbished Olympic. (26 December) First performance of Planché's burletta *Olympic Devils* with Vestris as Orpheus.
- 1832 Between seasons at the Olympic, Vestris performs at the Queen's Theatre, London and in the provinces. (26 December) Vestris plays Venus in Planché's *The Paphian Bower*.
- 1833 (April) Vestris performs at Covent Garden. Following a dispute over salaries, the Covent Garden actors perform at the Olympic for two months. Vestris is engaged at the Haymarket for a month. Vestris begins a four-year affair with Lord Edward Thynne. (26 December) Vestris stars as Perseus in Planché and Dance's *The Deep Deep Sea*.
- 1835 (February) Charles Dance complains to *The Times* of Vestris charging him in exchange for singing one of his songs. (14 March) Vestris produces Planché's *The Court Beauties*. (July) Vestris has a short engagement at the Surrey Theatre, where she plays in *The Deep Deep Sea*. (7 December) Charles Mathews debuts at the Olympic in his play *The Humpbacked Lover*.
- 1836 (29 February) Princess Victoria attends performance of Bayley's *One Hour*, in which Vestris and Mathews have the leading roles. (26 December) Vestris plays Princess Esmeralda in Planché and Dance's fairy extravaganza *Riquet with the Tuft*.
- 1837 (February) Vestris takes legal action to prevent her brother-in-law Joshua Anderson from taking further loans out in her name. (April) Vestris declares herself bankrupt. (6 April) Princess Victoria attends performance of John Oxenford's *The Rape of the Lock* and later makes sketches of Vestris and Mathews. (June) Vestris's effects are auctioned.
- 1838 (16 April) Vestris appears in Planché's review *The Drama's Levée, or, A Peep at the Past* as a valedictory production at the Olympic before going to America. (18 July) Vestris marries Charles James Mathews at Kensington church. (17 September) Vestris and Mathews begin a tour of America at the Park Theatre, New York, then appear at the Chestnut Street Theatre, Philadelphia and again in New York. (December) Vestris and Mathews return to London earlier than planned and resume management of the Olympic.
- 1839 (2 January) Vestris appears as Fatima in Planché's extravaganza *Blue Beard*, delayed to enable her to appear. (March) A box containing gunpowder is delivered to Vestris at the Olympic. (31 May) Final night of Vestris's management at the Olympic. (July) Vestris becomes manager and Mathews lessee of

- Covent Garden Theatre. (30 September) At opening night of Covent Garden, Vestris produces *Love's Labour's Lost* and appears as Rosaline. (10 October) Vestris plays Lady Teazle in Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*.
- 1840 (13 January) Vestris produces *Hamlet* with Moore as the lead. (7 February) Leigh Hunt's *A Legend of Florence* is produced. (12 February) Vestris produces Planché's *The Fortunate Isles* to celebrate the marriage of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. (28 February) Queen Victoria attends performance of Sheridan Knowles's *Love* in which Vestris plays Catherine. (23 March) Vestris produces *Romeo and Juliet* with James Anderson and Emmeline Montague as the lovers and Charles Kemble as Mercutio. (20 April) Vestris plays Princess Is-a-belle in Planché's Easter extravaganza, *The Sleeping Beauty*. (30 April) Vestris produces *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and plays Mrs Page. (16 November) Vestris produces *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and plays part of Oberon.
- 1841 (4 March) Vestris appears as Grace Harkaway in the first production of Dion Boucicault's comedy *London Assurance*. Queen Victoria attends the third performance. (12 April) Vestris plays Beauty in Planché's Easter extravaganza, *Beauty and the Beast*. (Summer) Mathews and Vestris tour the provinces.
- 1842 (8 March) Vestris is acclaimed for her performance as the first Bacchante in *Comus*. (30 April) Last performance at Covent Garden before Mathews and Vestris are forced out by Charles Kemble over non-payment of rent. (May) Mathews declares himself bankrupt. He and Vestris are engaged to appear at Drury Lane by Macready. (5 October) Mathews and Vestris perform in Planché's two-act comedy *The Follies of the Night* at Drury Lane. (November) After a disagreement with Macready, they leave Drury Lane and appear at the Haymarket under Benjamin Webster's management.
- 1843 (January–April) Vestris and Mathews tour Dublin, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Newcastle and Liverpool. (June) Death of Vestris's mother. (November) Debt forces Mathews and Vestris to move to Paris. (December) They return to England, Mathews again begins bankruptcy proceedings and they are re-engaged at the Haymarket.
- 1844 (February) During court proceedings for bankruptcy Anderson testifies against Mathews. Mathews is discharged but his and Vestris's wardrobe is auctioned. (November) They disagree with Boucicault over their roles in his play *Old Heads and Young Hearts*.
- 1845 (February) Vestris plays Mrs Page in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at the Haymarket. (March) Vestris takes role of Medea in Planché's *The Golden Fleece* at the Haymarket. (April) In Jerrold's *Time Works Wonders* Vestris plays a schoolgirl, Bessie Tulip. (26 May) Queen Victoria attends a performance. (11 August) Following several months of touring, Vestris and Mathews begin an engagement at the Surrey Theatre
- 1846 (7 March) Vestris and Mathews engaged at the Princess's Theatre for five months.
- 1847 (January) Vestris starts on a six-month farewell tour in the provinces. (April) Vestris and Mathews take lease on the Lyceum. (18 October) At the opening night of the newly refurbished Lyceum, Vestris performs in Planché's *The Pride of the Market*. (7 December) Vestris performs as Mrs Page in Shakespeare Night to raise funds for the campaign to buy Shakespeare's birthplace.
- 1848 (1 May) Death of Vestris's sister Josephine. Her daughters move in with Vestris and Mathews. (20 November) Vestris plays Mrs Page in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* with Mathews as Slender.
- 1849 (March) Queen Victoria attends another performance of *Love* at Covent Garden. (26 December 1849) Opening night of Planché's extravaganza *The Island of Jewels*.
- 1850 (4 December) Vestris and Mathews perform in Planché's *Day of Reckoning*.
- 1852 Vestris produces G. H. Lewes's eight-act play *A Chain of Events*.
- 1853 At end of the 1852–3 season Mathews tours provinces alone as Vestris is not well enough to accompany him. (December) Vestris appears in Planché's extravaganza, *Once Upon A Time There Were Two Kings*.
- 1854 (26 July) Vestris makes her final stage appearance in a benefit for Mathews at the Lyceum.

- 1855 Vestris suffers from cancer of the uterus and is confined to her home (Gore Lodge, Fulham). (24 March) Mathews, experiencing severe financial problems, closes the Lyceum Theatre.
- 1856 (4 July) While on tour in Preston, Mathews is arrested and imprisoned in Lancaster Castle for debt. (4 August) Mathews returns to London. (8 August) Vestris dies. She is buried in a private ceremony at Kensal Green cemetery.

## I. EARLY NOTICES

'King's Theatre', *The Times*, 21 July 1815, p. 3. British Library, Colindale Newspaper Collection.

'The Mirror of Fashion', *Morning Chronicle*, 22 July 1815, p. 3. British Library, Colindale Newspaper Collection.

'Madame Vestris (*Extract of a Letter from Paris*)', *British Stage and Literary Cabinet* 1:3 (March 1817), p. 67. British Library, shelfmark C.119.d.16-21.

'Theatrical Examiner', *Examiner*, 27 February 1820, pp. 139–40. British Library, Colindale Newspaper Collection.

'Artaxerxes', *Theatrical Inquisitor*, 16 (April 1820), p. 236. British Library, shelfmark PP5211.

'Giovanni in London', *Theatrical Inquisitor*, 17 (July 1820), pp. 393–5. British Library, shelfmark PP5211.

'Biographical Sketches of Illustrious and Distinguished Characters, Number One Hundred and Thirty-Eight: Madame Vestris', *La Belle Assemblée*, 138 (July 1820), pp. 47–8.

Vestris's debut performance at the King's Theatre on 20 July 1815 attracted attention from many of the theatrical critics. She played Proserpina in Peter Weber's opera *Il Ratto di Proserpina*, based on the mythological story of the rape of Proserpina (Persephone) by Pluto (Hades). The two reviews reprinted here are from daily newspapers. Both suggest that the part was a challenging one for a novice, particularly since it had been composed for the renowned Italian opera singer Guiseppina Grissini (1773–1850). She had sung it at its premiere at the same theatre a decade earlier. Like Vestris, Grissini had a colourful love life and is alleged to have had liaisons with Napoleon and the Duke of Wellington. Despite the difficulty of the task, both critics believe Vestris acquitted herself well, with *The Times* being particularly flattering, claiming she has a greater voice than Grissini and is 'the most faultless and bewitching *debutante* that we have ever seen' (below, p. 5). The *Morning Chronicle* reviewer, while complimentary, advocates that she needs to study to further develop her natural assets. Vestris's career seems to have had an auspicious start.

It is perhaps not surprising therefore that she should choose to make her first appearance on a Parisian stage in the same part. This took place on 7 December 1816 and was reported in an anonymous letter from Paris reprinted in the *British Stage and Literary Cabinet* in March

of the following year. This monthly publication was edited by Thomas Kenrick and ran from 1817 to 1822. The letter-writer reports an enthusiastic reception for Vestris at the Théâtre des Italiens, but claims the audience and French critics have been ‘deluded’ (below, p. 7). He/she contends that Vestris lacks real musical talent and is contemptuous of the oft-repeated assertion that she is Italian. However, compared to the criticism of her co-performer, Caroline Dickons as Ceres, the censure of Vestris is not too bad. The unfortunate Dickons is described as ‘vulgar in the extreme.’ This was a rare failure for her.<sup>1</sup>

The next review is from the *Examiner*, which was edited by Leigh Hunt (1784–1859), who would later write a play that Vestris produced at Covent Garden (below, p. 145). Here he is reporting on her performance as Lilla in James Cobb’s opera *The Siege of Belgrade*, the first role she undertook at Drury Lane in 1820. Once again mention is made of her Italian ancestry, though this time it is seen as advantageous for she combines ‘the true Italian style of singing’ with correct English pronunciation (below, p. 8). Hunt’s enthusiasm for Vestris’s portrayal is echoed in a review in the *Mirror of the Stage*, which states ‘The *Lilla* of Madame Vestris, has no superior.’<sup>2</sup>

In the same season at Drury Lane Vestris also sung the title role in Thomas Arne’s opera *Artaxerxes*, a character she was to reprise many times. It was the first time she had played a male role albeit one composed for a male soprano or castrato. The review given here is from the monthly journal the *Theatrical Inquisitor*. It gives a lukewarm reception to Vestris’s portrayal of the Persian prince and is particularly critical of her simple singing style. The same issue also carries a review of Vestris’s performance three days later as Dolly Snip in *Shakespeare Versus Harlequin*. At one point in this piece, originally written by Garrick in response to the popularity of pantomime rather than Shakspearian performances, Vestris is transformed into Columbine. The critic’s response is more positive than for her portrayal of Artaxerxes as even though he still cavils at her ‘vocal poverty’ he admits she ‘evinced a spirit and a naiveté in *Dolly Snip*, which were highly captivating, and if cultivated with zealous attention, will render her one of the most pleasing actresses it has ever been our honest enjoyment to applaud.’<sup>3</sup>

This approval was shortlived, however, as Vestris’s next role was to bring about widespread condemnation from many quarters, the *Theatrical Inquisitor* being no exception. The part that caused such a furore was the cross-dressed (also known as breeches) role of Giovanni in the burlesque written by William Moncrieff. Called *Giovanni in London*, the piece was based on Mozart’s opera *Don Giovanni* (1787). It was not the first production of Moncrieff’s work; in fact, the piece had been popular at the Olympic Theatre when it premiered in December 1817 with Miss Burrell as the libertine.<sup>4</sup> The manager of the Olympic at that time was Robert Elliston. In May 1820 Elliston was in control of Drury Lane and sought to repeat the commercial success by re-staging the burlesque with Vestris in the title role. Audiences were enthusiastic especially as Vestris’s costume allowed them to see her legs. Soon London was flooded with memorabilia sporting Vestris’s figure in character. A bizarre manifestation of this commercial exploitation came to light when a legal case was brought over the theft of a plaster cast of her leg. This in turn prompted an anonymous ballad entitled ‘Madam Vestris’s Legs’ with the chorus:

Some villain stole my Lady's legs,  
 We hope he will get justice,  
 Handsome just above the knee,  
 The legs of Madam Vestris.<sup>5</sup>

The production proved so popular that it was repeated for many years. For example, the barrister and ex-foreign editor of *The Times*, Henry Crabbe Robinson recorded going to see it in his diary entry for 13 April 1822:

... I ended the evening by going to Drury Lane to see *Giovanni in London* – A very amusing extravaganza – Mrs Vestris is a fascinating creature and renders the Don as entertaining as possible and at the same time there is an air of irony and mere wanton and assumed wickedness which renders the piece harmless enough. The parodies on well known songs etc are well executed – <sup>6</sup>

Reviewing the opening performance of 30 May 1820, the critic of the *Theatrical Inquisitor* was in no doubt that a piece such as *Giovanni in London* should not be placed before the public in one of the two patent theatres. He takes offence at the 'extreme indecency which runs through every vein of this stupid composition', deeming it inappropriate for a respectable establishment (below, p. 12). Elliston is censured for producing it and Vestris for having the indelicacy to agree to appear in it.

The following month the same publication carried a review of the production of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* at the Haymarket. Vestris was once again performing a breeches role, that of Captain Macheath. This too proved to be a commercial success. Once again, the critic has harsh words about her singing and suggests that people are swept away by her appearance. He cites as an example a 'silly fellow' whose review of the production appeared in the *London Magazine* in the same month. Not only does the unnamed critic approve of the humour of the burlesque, but he also rhapsodizes on Vestris's personal beauty:

There is a pulpy softness and ripeness in her lips, a roseate hue, like the leaves of the damask rose, a luscious honeyed sound in her voice, a depth and fulness [sic] too, as if were clogged with its own sweets, a languid archness, an Italian lustre in her eye, an enchanting smile, a mouth – shall we go on? No. But she is more bewitching even than Miss Brunton.<sup>7</sup>

*La Belle Assemblée* was a monthly periodical published between 1806 and 1832. The issue for July 1820 carries a piece on Vestris in one of a series of 'biographical sketches of distinguished and illustrious characters'. The previous months' editions had carried similar articles on fellow Drury Lane actresses Miss Edmiston and Miss Forde, Princess Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen and Phillis Glover, who was newly engaged at the Surrey Theatre. Vestris's portrait, engraved from a painting by R. E. Drummond, is in the French style.<sup>8</sup> She appears as a glamorous woman adorned with a striking jewelled tiara and holding a monocle. The accompanying text attests to the painting's likeness to the model. It does, however, seem an odd choice of image to illustrate a text that is mainly concerned with her portrayal of breeches parts. This may in part be explained by the fact that the journal was, according to its cover, 'addressed particularly to the ladies'. Given that as Rachel Cowgill suggests, 'Vestris is unusual amongst actresses of the

nineteenth century in that she exists for us only through the male gaze', this is a rare example of something directly aimed at women (though presumably selected by a man).<sup>9</sup> The choice of this feminine portrait may thus be read as an attempt to play down the more sexually challenging responses that her transvestite roles provoked.<sup>10</sup>

Notes:

1. *ODNB*.
2. *Mirror of the Stage*, 1:9 (2 December 1822) p. 131.
3. *Theatrical Inquisitor* (April 1820), p. 240 (not reproduced below).
4. Burrell, later Mrs Gould.
5. Ballad printed by T. Birt, reprinted in C. J. Williams, *Madame Vestris – a Theatrical Biography* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1973), p. 60.
6. *The London Theatre 1811–1866: Selections from the diary of Henry Crabb Robinson*, ed. E. Brown (London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1966) p. 99.
7. *London Magazine*, 2:7 (July 1820) p. 93.
8. C. J. Williams, *Madame Vestris – a Theatrical Biography* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1973), p. 41.
9. R. Cowgill, 'Re-gendering the Libertine; or, the Taming of the Rake: Lucy Vestris as Don Giovanni on the Early Nineteenth-Century London Stage', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 10:1 (March 1998) p. 65.
10. See K. Fletcher, 'Planché, Vestris, and the Transvestite Role: Sexuality and Gender in Victorian Popular Theatre', *Nineteenth Century Theatre*, 15 (1987), pp. 9–33.

### **KING'S THEATRE**

The public are so well acquainted with the Opera of *Il Ratto di Proserpina*, that it would be impertinent in us to dwell at much length on the nerve, the science, and musical feeling which pervades it. This Opera is said to have been written for GRASSINI. It has a farther, and we speak after due deliberation when we say a *higher* claim to public favour, from the various talent and exquisite attraction of a performer whom it introduced to our notice last night, when Madame VESTRIS,—married, we believe, about 2 years ago, to ARMAND VESTRIS, ballet-master at this theatre, and granddaughter, we are told, to the celebrated BARTOLOZZI,—came forward for her husband's benefit, in the character of *Proserpina*, a most arduous undertaking for a novice. We much regret that the late hour at which the performance ended will enable us to give but a very slight and imperfect picture of the degree to which we were pleased, captivated, and astonished. This lady, not more than sixteen years of age, has a form of perfect symmetry, with a beautiful countenance, capable of the most animated expression—into which spirit and energy may be called up when she will—but in which, while unexcited, feminine delicacy predominates. Her voice is a *contralto* of the finest order. Young as she is, it has all the mellow richness of GRASSINI's—perhaps we might without exaggeration say, that it possesses more of that quality than GRASSINI could boast of in the zenith of her fame; and it indisputably possesses a greater compass, reaching far beyond her in the upper notes. She gave the beautiful air of "Paga fui," in a style of the most inimitable simplicity and purity. In the celebrated address, "O Giove onnipossente," in which we think GRASSINI was supposed to excel, Madame VESTRIS combined more charms of voice, look, and action, than we have almost ever been touched by within our memory.

The wife of VESTRIS may naturally be presumed to move with grace; but there is a keeping in her movement,—an adaptation of it to the sense,—an association of the step and gesture to the superior faculties of mind and voice, which appeared to us to complete the image of the most faultless and bewitching *débutante* that we have ever seen; veiled though she was, and, it must not be forgotten, in the inevitable terrors of a first presentation, and less capable, as we are sure it will be hereafter found, of giving the full scope of which they are susceptible to powers, of which, however, she displayed sufficient to make it seem unreasonable that we should wish for more. Madame VESTRIS, we trust, is now fixed at the Opera-house, and the lateness of the season at which she has come forward is the only circumstance in her accession to that splendid establishment which we consider with the shadow of regret. It would be extreme injustice to Madame SESSI, were we to omit offering our suffrage to the admirable talent she displayed throughout the whole of last night's performance: she was repeatedly encored, and invariably applauded. GRAAM and LEVASSEUR also contributed their due share to the eclat with which the Opera was received. Every part of the house was crowded.

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THE  
MIRROR OF FASHION.

TO SHOW  
THE VIRTUE AND BEAUTY OF THE TIME,  
ITS FASHION AND PRESSURE.

We are very sorry to learn from Windsor, that her MAJESTY'S indisposition is so severe as to confine her to the Castle.

The Princess CHARLOTTE took an airing yesterday to Wandsworth in an open carriage, accompanied by her usual attendants.

We hear that the Duchess of CUMBERLAND is expected to arrive in this country soon, to be re-married. The Chapel Royal is fitting up for the occasion, and the PRINCE REGENT has confident hopes that he shall be able to reconcile the QUEEN and the rest of the Royal Family to the union; in which case a grand matrimonial Fête will be given at the Pavilion.

Orders were yesterday issued from the Lord CHAMBERLAIN'S Office for the COURT to go out of deep mourning next Tuesday, then to wear half mourning till the 24th of August.

Mr. TAYLOR, of Covent-garden Theatre, the ELIORS, Mr. GOSS, and Master TULLE, are about to visit the Islands of Jersey and Guernsey, to give the inhabitants a specimen of refined English music, in vocal concerts there.

One of the Treasury Journals, after exhausting all the laudatory epithets usually applied to public men, has designated the present Ministers "the *belligerent* Administration."

KING'S THEATRE.—Mr. ARMAND VESTRIS was honoured, on Thursday evening, with a most numerous attendance to his benefit, as a just compliment to his talents and exertions, and also from the high treat which he held out of an Opera so superior to those which have been latterly given at this Theatre. The *Itatto di Proserpina*, so deservedly dear to the Amateurs of musical merit, had the further attraction of the young and beautiful wife of M. VESTRIS, as a *Debutante* in the principal character. Mrs. VESTRIS is the grand daughter of the celebrated BARTOLOZZI, who after enriching this country with the most beautiful specimens of his valuable art, was drawn by the superior generosity of the PRINCE REGENT of Portugal to close his life in Lisbon. Her mother has been long known as an admirable professional performer on the piano-forte—and it may therefore be said, that the young Lady has from her birth had the advantage of hearing the best music—though we believe that her only tutor in the difficult and exquisite art of singing has been Mr. CORRU. It was a most arduous task for her, indeed, to attempt a part so difficult as that of *Proserpina*, especially as it had been executed with such powers of voice, and such energy of acting, as were displayed by Madame GRASMINI. The young lady evidently felt the arduous task she had to fulfil—but we were delighted to find that her native talents sustained her through the difficulty. She displayed no ordinary charms of voice, which, set off by her sweet and interesting person, the grace and propriety of her deportment, and the energy of her acting, drew from the crowded Theatre the most gratifying applause. Her voice is a *conté alto*, sweet, though not powerful. It would be capable of great development by cultivation, and she is young enough for the acquisition of all the graces of the art. We sincerely hope that the flattering reception she experienced will induce her to devote herself to the study of the science in which she so clearly has it in her power to be a professor. Several of the most difficult airs were encored, and she was particularly impressive in the stile of her acting, in which the sweetest simplicity were joined with appropriate impression. Madame SASSI was also more than usually fortunate in the performance of her part; and we are glad to see that the House means to conclude their season with this Opera, which must be highly attractive.



AND LITERARY CABINET.

MADAME VESTRIS.

(Extract of a letter from Paris.)

“Most of the fashionable gentry who last season frequented the King’s Theatre, must doubtless remember the appearance of this lady, in the character of Proserpina, in July 1815, and many who were drawn to the theatre by her personal attractions will be rejoiced to hear that their little favourite has been received at Paris with all the applause to which such attractions entitle her. On the 7th of December last, she made her debut, in the same character, at the Theatre Royal Italien; and she has since continued playing at that house with success. Many encomiums have been passed on her singing, which are by no means commensurate with the nature of her acquirements in that art. The French critics, like their English brethren, appear to have been deluded by her personal charms, and, to have mistaken a proficiency in one particular part for real musical genius.

Madame Vestris is certainly gifted with a good voice, and she sings one or two songs in a pleasing manner;—so, a man may have a good flute, and perchance he may by exhausting his breath and annoying his neighbour, contrive to play a tune or two upon it; but it requires something more to constitute real talent; and the performer, even with the aid of his good instrument, must eventually disgust by a too frequent repetition of the same air. So is it with Madame Vestris; at first, for a short time, she will please, but upon a more intimate acquaintance (I speak only of her musical powers) she will gradually become less attractive. The criticisms on her appearance have been universally favourable, but if the cor-

rectness of judgment on the part of the writers, is to be measured by their knowledge with regard to her origin, the result will not be very favourable to the fair actress herself, for it was gravely asserted that ‘Madamo-Bartolozzi-Vestris, niece of the great engraver, is in every respect a veritable Italiane, since Venice gave her birth.’ What could possibly induce the good people of this place to publish such a statement remains to be explained; but certain it is that Madame Vestris, or, Madame-Bartolozzi-Vestris, if they will have it so, was born in London in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and ninety seven; and, it is no less certain that the celebrated engraver Bartolozzi, who lately died in Portugal, was father to her father, and consequently (unless these matters are here managed otherwise) he must have been her grandfather.—The part of Ceres. was sustained by Mrs. Dickons, and there was a certain motherly look about her, which was perfectly in character. Her singing is, “as it was in the beginning, and will be evermore”—vulgar in the extreme.”

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