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The present essay looks into *The Drama's Levée*, the last burletta performed at the Royal Olympic Theatre before its manager and main actress, Madame Vestris, embarked on her American tour in 1838. The piece critically reviews London's last theatrical season and announces madame Vestris's departure for the United States. Close attention to its content and tone uncovers its audience's horizon of expectations, and, at the same time, discloses some of the likely reasons for the hostile reception 'The Queen of the Olympic' would meet in The United States. The analysis sets the text in its geographical, ideological, cultural and theatrical context, and takes advantage of the valuable information its varied paratexts provide about its diverse contexts of reception.

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LOOKING INTO *THE DRAMA'S LEVÉE* FOR CLUES TO MADAME VESTRIS'S RECEPTION ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

PURIFICACIÓN RIBES TRAVER

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The present essay looks into *The Drama's Levée*, the last burletta performed at the Royal Olympic Theatre before its manager and main actress, Madame Vestris, embarked on her American Tour in 1838. The piece critically reviews London's last theatrical season and announces Madame Vestris's departure for The United States. Close attention to its content and tone uncovers its audience's horizon of expectations, and, at the same time, discloses some of the likely reasons for the hostile reception 'The Queen of the Olympic' would meet with in The United States. The analysis sets the text in its geographical, ideological, cultural and theatrical context, and takes advantage of the valuable information its varied paratexts provide about its diverse contexts of reception.

Madame Vestris, born Elizabetta Bartolozzi (1797-1856), was a well-known actress. By April 16, 1838, when *The Drama's Levée* was premiered, she had been a successful manager of the Royal Olympic Theatre for eight seasons.¹ In this

regard, Tracy C. Davis highlights the ‘remarkable accomplishment of being a woman in an industry overwhelmingly dominated by male owners and managers’ (‘Female Managers’ 115), and concludes that ‘Vestris led the way into profitable management of the minors in the 1830s’ (116). It must be born in mind, however, that – as Davis notes – ‘the profession of acting remained tainted’ (*The Economics of the British Stage* 285), an idea shared by Katherine Newey, who remarks that ‘Vestris pursued a theatre career at a time of high anxiety about the position of women’ (193).

In April 1838, Madame Vestris was ready to leave for America as part of a process that successful actors and actresses undertook as a means of improving their financial situation. At this time, American theatres were still strongly influenced by London theatres, and secured the services of British actors in order to draw large audiences to their houses. Madame Vestris was engaged by Stephen Price, manager of the Park Theatre in New York, to perform some of her most successful pieces with the man who would eventually become her second husband, Charles James Mathews. It is worth pointing out that – when the trip was announced – some American newspapers sarcastically alluded to Madame Vestris’s marriage as a move to counter negative reactions from prudish American audiences (‘Madame Vestris’, *Spirit of the Times* 204). Others, however, regretted what they regarded as a condescending attitude on the part of American audiences towards this notorious woman (‘Madame Vestris’, *The Morning Herald* 4).

The Drama’s Levée is an extravaganza – or burletta – the limits of these genres being somewhat obscure, as the character ‘Censure’ makes clear when he says: ‘nobody ever knew what a *burletta* is’ (Planché, *The Drama’s Levée* 22). This genre was clearly intended to circumvent the theatrical regulations which limited the performance of plays to two licensed – or legitimate – theatres: Covent Garden and Drury Lane. As the character ‘Praise’ explains to ‘Drama’, the ‘illegitimate’ theatres found a way of survival through the introduction of vocal music:

[...] here, you know,
It’s quite against the law. I’ll tell you, though,
How you may manage. *Sing some arietta!*
And if they question you, say you’re *Burletta* [My italics] (25).

Written by James Robinson Planché, *The Drama’s Levée, or A Peep at the Past*, offers a shrewd review of the state of English drama during the eight seasons that Madame Vestris had been manager of the Olympic. He does so by setting

the action between 'A Peep at the Past' and 'A Dream of the Future'. In the first case, he reviews the main pieces performed in English theatres during that period of time, and highlights Madame Vestris's valuable contribution to its development, both as actress and theatre manager.²

In 'A Dream of the Future', the nightmarish uncertainty of her imminent American Tour is introduced. It ends with a moving farewell where her whole 'Olympic' ensemble of actors – in the role of mythological deities – see her off and wish her well in that foreign land she is so reluctant to visit. She expresses her hope for a reception as favourable as the one she has enjoyed at home, but does not conceal her fear that adverse criticism might interfere with her dreams of success and prosperity.

Although written before the tour actually took place, the piece exhibits a sort of prophetic anticipation of the failure she and her husband would encounter during their American experience. Even though the reasons for this potential failure are not mentioned in this burletta, a close look at the piece's tone, content and style may provide us with a key to what would ultimately happen to Mr. and Mrs. Matthews in America. That tone, content and style were adopted with a specific audience in mind – one with a certain ideological, educational, and cultural background. This could not be ignored by a couple of English actors with an acting style that was congenial to their countrymen, but was, perhaps, less so to their transatlantic brethren.

Another factor that might have contributed to the cold reception the British couple met with in the US is the fierce commercial competition between theatres. The rivalry between Price – manager of the Park – and James Wallack – recently appointed manager of the National Theatre – was particularly noticeable, as the press made clear: 'Nothing behind its competitor in the vigor of its arrangements, [The National] boldly enters into the arena, disputing the palm of victory with its rival' ('Theatricals', vol. 9, Sept. 1838, 247). This – as Grinstead observed – might have had a bearing on some of the savage attacks the Press would hurl at them: 'On arriving at New-York [...] a portion of the press was industriously employed in 'writing them down'' (260). Some magazines, however, minimized the importance of these attacks (C. 366). Accepting the offer of a manager – Mr Price, from the Park Theatre – and declining that of his competitor – Mr Wallack, manager of the National Theatre –³ must have brought about resentment at the prospect of monetary loss.⁴

Commercial competition lies behind the nature of a good number of the pieces that *The Drama's Levée* reviews. It pervades all aspects related to it, from the flexible application of theatrical and censorship regulations, to the wide range of theatrical offerings at the legitimate and illegitimate playhouses, which

include all sorts of musical and visual spectacles of a widely differing quality. The opening exchanges between Drama's 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' children allude to their mutual thefts, so that 'illegitimate' theatres perform spoken texts in disguise, whereas 'legitimate' playhouses put on all kinds of spectacles, in the hope of filling their large houses. That is why 'Drama' exclaims: 'They so confound me that though I'm their mother, / I vow I sometimes *can't tell one from th'other*' [My italics] (13).-

Although Planché is clearly appreciative of Shakespeare's or Friedrich Schiller's plays — as well as Mozart's or Daniel Auber's operas — he also exhibits a practical nature. This leads him to approve of adaptations that do not exceed the vocal capacities of the performers. As Clifford Williams observes, 'Planché knew what actors could speak and what singers could sing effectively in English' (69). That is why he praises *The Black Domino* — a light adaptation of Daniel Auber's *Le Domino Noir* — whose title role Madame Vestris performed at the *Olympic*. Aware that this adaptation was a mere trifle of a pleasant nature, he mocked the failed attempt of Covent Garden at performing the opera in its entirety in the naïve belief that it would draw audiences as large as those the original piece had attracted in Paris.

The obsession with drawing clients to the playhouse lies also behind the success of the acrobatic spectacle 'The Gnome Fly', performed by an actor that walked on the ceiling of several theatres. Its inclusion in several theatre programmes is justified by 'Praise', who goes as far as to own: 'who live to please, must please to live' (18). American reviewers also observe that there are no limits to the decisions made by theatrical managers, as long as they fill their houses ('Theatricals', vol. 10, Jan. 1839, 150), as *The Knickerbocker* openly admits: 'This is decidedly a utilitarian age, and the drama has become infected' (C. 365).

Economic difficulties — or the prospect of making a fortune abroad — had led a number of famous English actors and actresses to accept the offer of American managers to play in their theatres. According to C., from *The Knickerbocker*, 'many English performers gain more money by one year's engagement here, than they could possibly obtain by five years' arduous labor in their profession at home' (366). The name of the most active and famous American manager, Mr Price, is the object of wordplay in *The Drama's Levée*. He is responsible for the high *price* Madame Vestris has to pay to recoup her losses, a promise the imposing 'American Serpent' from the popular *burletta* *The Deep, Deep Sea*, makes her: 'There's a power of money to be made therein' (*The Drama's Levée* 27). This 'American Serpent' had enjoyed great success, first at the *Olympic* — where the piece was premiered in 1833 — and then in the United States

— where it filled houses in New York and Philadelphia the following season. That is probably the reason why this Serpent urges fainting Vestris to ‘get her steam up’, as she has already ‘signed and sealed’ her contract (*The Drama’s Levée* 27). In his autobiography, Charles J. Mathews offers detailed information of the contract they signed with Mr Price: ‘My wife and I were tempted by an offer from Mr Price, the manager of the Park Theatre in New York, to go to America for a year, upon secure engagements amounting to £20,000’ (vol. 2, 82). Although — according to Jo Robinson — ‘Vestris recouped her losses on the lease of the Olympic with an American trip’ (###) , *The Morning Herald* estimated their loss in the two months they remained in the United States at \$5000 (‘Madame Vestris’ 4). This loss contrasts with the positive balance of the singer Madame Caradori Allan, who, according to *The Morning Herald*, earned \$50,000 in two years (‘Madame Caradori Allan’ 2).

The manager of the Park Theatre must have thought that the presence of the celebrated Vestris would suffice to fill houses, even when the theatre’s permanent ensemble could no longer assist her in her task. The January 1839 issue of *The Ladies’ Companion* would say in this regard: ‘Mr. Simpson attaches no importance to his stock company. But we say here is the only remedy: strengthen that company in all its parts’ (‘Theatricals’ vol. 10, 150). A deficient stock company was similarly associated with Miss Ellen Tree’s failure at the Park Theatre (‘Theatricals’ vol. 10, Nov. 1838, 48). At the National, however, Wallack presented its audience ‘with a company of comedians never equalled in the Union’ (‘Theatricals’ vol. 9, Sept. 1838, 247).

It looks as though the theatre manager also thought any theatrical offering would work, provided the Olympic ‘Star’ featured in it. That is why an aggressive advertising campaign was set in motion, where the bewitching powers of this supernatural Star were highlighted beyond measure. She was described as possessing ‘a form and features as full of beauty as if Phidias had designed them in search of ideal perfection’ (‘Theatricals’ vol. 9, Oct. 1838, 298), a perfection that included her performing abilities (‘Theatricals’ vol. 9, Sept. 1838, 247). It also seems that her highly acclaimed ‘natural’ style would be to the taste of American audiences. However, the complete failure of her tour attests to the contrary. To judge from some reviews, American patrons seem to have favoured a less restrained acting style, to the point that they thought watching a lady behave like herself was a waste of money, as ‘they could see such acting every day in a lady’s parlor without paying a dollar’ (‘Theatricals’ vol. 10, Dec. 1838, 98). This view is opposite to that ironically expressed by ‘Fancy’ in *The Drama’s Levée*, when — tongue in cheek — she offers ‘Drama’ some sort of consolation for the loss of her most cherished actors — Mr and Mrs Wood, and

Miss Ellen Tree — whom 'Yankee Doodle' has 'packed off to Liverpool' (27). 'Fancy' — playing with words — says: 'Well, if he caused your *woods* and *trees* to range, / He sent a mighty Forrest in exchange' (27). This mighty Forrest was no other than Edwin Forrest, the famous American tragedian who had established the American heroic style of acting, an uninhibited style that had proved popular with unsophisticated American audiences.

Although some American critics made clear that Mr. Forrest 'c[ould] never endue his form and face with the subtle spirit which all of Shakespeare's characters should possess in some degree' ('Theatricals' vol. 10, Dec. 1838, 98), and regretted the 'loud tones' and the 'fierce and frantic gesticulation' he adopted in his delivery of Hamlet's monologue 'To be or not to be' ('Theatricals' vol. 9, Oct. 1838, 299), that did not prevent him from succeeding with the crowds, especially when performing his favourite roles of Spartacus or Metamora ('Theatricals' vol. 10, Dec. 1838, 98). In 1836, however — when he performed the role of Spartacus in London — he could not succeed with the audiences attending Drury Lane, even though his strong voice and roust frame were well suited to the role (Eaton 242).⁵

Attention to the differences in the horizon of expectations of both audiences across the Atlantic may cast some light on the failure of the piece selection made by Mr and Mrs Mathews for their American Tour. This selection included 'The Introduction' to *The Drama's Levée*, a piece filled with topical allusions that ordinary American spectators would not be familiar with, and written in a sophisticated style that required a certain educational and cultural background. According to *The New-York Mirror*, 'The little allegorical *extravaganza* of *The Drama's Levée* [...] was not calculated to convey an adequate impression of [Madame Vestris's] powers. There are many good hits in it, but they are mostly local, and not of a character to raise a laugh out of the meridian of London' ('The Drama' 111).

The piece seldom develops its veiled allusions to the variety of issues it tackles, but addresses them in a laconic and ironic style that requires the spectator's active collaboration for its enjoyment. It not only alludes to the theatrical regulations that constrain the richness and variety of plays — and that divides the playhouses between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' — but also hints at the different ways of circumventing the law. It offers a quick overview of the different types of spectacles that had recently been performed at different London venues, something that could only be appreciated by those familiar with the pieces. This is the case, for example, with the two 'Joans of Arc' that had been performed in London the previous year. *The Drama's Levée* does not explain that the play performed in Covent Garden was by Thomas J. Serle,

or that the opera staged in Drury Lane was by Michael W. Balfe. It does not make clear either why 'Drama' — disappointed at the news she is given on the play's authorship — exclaims: 'Oh, for the Joans of Schiller, Shakespeare, Southey!' (16). It does not explain why she draws attention to the second Joan of Arc, by saying: 'Behold another Simon Pure' (16). Only those familiar with Shakespeare's *Henry VI, part I*, would probably understand her allusion to Joan of Arc's hypocritical claim to her purity as a means of escaping death. And only those acquainted with Schiller's tragedy *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* (1801) — or Robert Southey's epic poem *Joan of Arc* (1796) — would make sense of her exclamation. Similarly, the mocking song that Joan sings to show 'Drama' 'her claim to her affection' leaves no doubt as to the limited capacities of the actress performing the title role in the failed opera. In this case, Planché maliciously re-creates the mechanic rhythm of her tune by resorting to the employment of anapaestic feet. These feet, combined with the lines' initial iambs — 'My trumpet I'll sound for an hour, / Or longer, I'm sure, if you like' — effectively echo the 'clash, and dash and crash' of her song (16).

Like 'Drama', 'Censure' repeatedly voices his regret at the lack of refinement some of the spectacles exhibit. This is particularly effective when expressed in Latin, as is the case when 'Censure' tells 'Drama': *verbum sat* (18) — the abbreviated form of *verbum satis sapienti ist* — which means: 'a word to the wise is sufficient'. These words significantly follow his suggestion regarding the best use for the Gnome Fly: 'Make! Why a bait for gudgeons. ...'.

There is still another feature — the piece's British patriotism — that could have prevented American audiences from relishing parts of *The Drama's Levée*, especially those sections where homeland virtues are set against the flaws of Brother Jonathan. This *burletta* establishes a close relationship between the British origins of drama and its past and future excellence.⁶ It starts by stating: 'The British public love the British stage', and announces: 'And days as bright as when thy birth was seen, / Are dawning 'neath another British Queen' (22). It thereby establishes a wishful continuity between Elizabeth I's golden age of drama, and that of the recently crowned Queen Victoria whose 'gracious smile' shall 'British bards with noble ardour' inspire.⁷ This is the same patriotic ardour Madame Vestris claims she will bear in her heart wherever she goes, as she lets her British audience know in her farewell speech at the end of *The Drama's Levée*:

Farewell, but though I must depart
In foreign climes to stray,
Go where I will, my grateful heart
Shall in old England stay (29).

According to *The Musical World*, this patriotism would contribute to Madame Vestris's 'overwhelming' reception at home on her return from her American tour, as — in their view — 'a new feeling had sprung up for the artist. She had been ill-treated in a foreign land, and that was enough to rouse John Bull to the highest pitch of enthusiasm' ('The Late Madame Vestris' vol. 34, no. 35, 30 Aug. 1856, 558). To judge from certain American reviews on her tour, it looks as though she proved incapable of showing a heart grateful enough to her New England patrons, who — either spontaneously, or moved by spurious interests — charged her and her husband with arrogance. According to *The Morning Herald*, July 25, 1839, '[Madame Vestris] went home as full of bitterness against the Americans as she came with arrogance'. A few days earlier, the same newspaper had stated, 'Madame Vestris [...] begins a strong opposition to American Theatricals' ('Theatricals — Foreign and Domestic' 2).

Some American newspapers went as far as to condemn the stanzas she sung at the *Park* to the tune of 'Jim Crow', a song Planché slyly alludes to in *The Drama's Levée*. Its unspeakable nature had prompted 'Drama' to 'cease to go' to the *Surrey* when the American Thomas Darmouth ('Daddy' Rice) took it there. Although — according to *The New-York Mirror* — 'the satire did not seem to be disrelished by her hearers', it is not difficult to imagine that Rice could resent the song the newspaper quoted at length, whose final lines were: 'It was a blot, on such a spot, / To jump Jim Crow' ('The Drama' 111). In Francis Wemyss's view, 'Her attack upon Jim Crow Rice — although not intended as ill nature — was so construed', and, accordingly, 'gave him an opportunity to lampoon her with effect' (252).

There is not a single character in *The Drama's Levée* — not even 'Praise' — that can find a reason to commend 'Jim Crow'. 'Praise' says: 'It was a pretty air — but there I stop; Its further eulogy e'en Praise must drop' (19). This remark does not come as a surprise if we take into account that this song — first performed in blackface in 1828 — mocked Black people. Although it had been successfully performed all over the United States,⁸ it could not be reasonably praised in a country that — in 1833 — had passed the Slavery Abolition Act — a step that would not be taken in the United States until 1865.

Planché is less subtle when, later in the piece, he has 'Drama' exclaim that his actors and actresses are 'tricked off' from her 'like kidnapp'd niggers' (26). This term of abuse underlines the brutality of 'those *eternal* Yankees' (25) in a way that is strikingly similar to the accusations made by *The New-York Mirror* in the short story titled 'The Yankee Boy' on the presumed cruelty of the British soldiers that unsuccessfully tried to impress a brave American young man (355). It is not difficult to find similar expressions of national pride in reviews

describing the positive or negative qualities of British actresses performing in the United States. Not surprisingly, Madam Caradori Allan is hailed as the epitome of good acting, particularly as she has fully assimilated American values, to the extent that she has even married an American man: 'Her feelings are American, her manners are American, her style is American, her child is an American, and she is American throughout, with only a slight tinge of the Italian, the English, and the Scotch character and feelings' ('Madame Caradori Allan' 2).⁹

We are not told whether Allan's style is natural or not, but we assume her performance perfectly suits the tastes of her American audience, something that does not seem to have been the case with Madame Vestris, whom the press often condemns as inferior to other American actresses who have recently performed some of the roles that are part of her theatrical offering. This new piece of information is not negligible, as American audiences were probably expecting a more substantial programme, with a higher number of new pieces, that had not been previously performed in the United States. According to the reviewer of *The Ladies' Companion*, '[Mr. and Mrs. Mathews's] efforts were too limited — the characters assumed, particularly those of Madame Vestris — too hackneyed, and upon previous occasions too ably represented by established favorites, to elicit any extraordinary sensation in their favor' ('Theatricals' vol. 10, Nov. 1838, 48).¹⁰

It must also be taken into account that previous performances of a piece could have created certain expectations as to the way it should be played, particularly if the part had been carefully rehearsed with an experienced company. This is something that — unfortunately for her — did not materialize in Madame Vestris's performances in America. Madame Vestris, however, was widely aware of the importance of good ensembles, as *The Musical World* highlights regarding her management at the Olympic: 'The new management set out depending for public support on *ensemble* in the casts' ('The Late Madame Vestris' vol. 34, no. 35, 30 Aug. 1856, 558).

The high expectations created by a well-orchestrated advertising campaign on the unspeakable beauty of Madame Vestris might have contributed to her negative reception as well. According to the 'London Correspondent' of *The New-York Mirror*, 'You expected to have seen a Hebe [...] or some other goddess swim onto the stage, and on walked a still good-looking, but middle-aged woman [...] And as a reaction of this kind always disposes people to *underpraise* as much as they were before inclined to *overpraise*, you, perhaps, did rather undervalue Madam' [Italics in the original] (52). Another campaign — clearly bent on bringing about her failure — highlighted her decrepitude and old

age when she was still in her early 40s. *The Corsair*, for example, alluded to her 'decay and ghastliness', and described her as 'bedaubed with paint and distorted with paralysis' ('London Theatricals' 14) — a description in line with William Appleton's allusion to her 'lavish use of blanching cream' in 1974 (114).

Madame Vestris's age, however, did not prevent her countrymen from appreciating her good acting qualities when she returned to the Olympic a few months later. If box-office returns can be used as a barometer of success, Madame Vestris's positive reception upon her return from America cannot be questioned, as she stated in her farewell address at the Olympic on May 31, 1839:

I left you with unfeigned regret, and returned to you with unbounded joy: and though it must be confessed that the mode in which you manifested your regret at my absence was more calculated to feed my vanity than my treasury, your kindness since my return has left the latter nothing to complain of ('The Late Madame Vestris' vol. 34, no. 36, 6 Sept. 567).

Madame Vestris was widely aware of the influence that press reviews could have on her success or failure. She soon realized that some newspapers tried to influence her reception negatively — probably because she had accepted the offer from the Park — as 'censure is dealt out unsparingly by some gentlemen who are inimical to the old house' ('Theatricals' vol. 10, Jan. 1839, 150). According to *The Ladies' Companion*, 'An attempt was made by one or two prints in this city, to excite a prejudice against these eminent performers [Mr. and Mrs. Mathews]' ('Theatricals' vol. 9, Oct. 1838, 298). This idea was similar to that expressed by *The Figaro in London* upon their return from their American tour: 'Mr. and Mrs. C. Mathews have returned to their native land, to that land in which the concealed enemy and slanderer possess not the power of blasting the public character of an individual through the means of a venal and corrupt press' ('Return of Madame Vestris' 142).

This is something *The Drama's Levée* also points out when alluding to Censure's negative review on Mrs. Honey's performance of *Don Juan* at Norton Folgate. This review — while punning on the actress's name — makes 'Praise' exclaim: 'he's too sour to relish Honey' (23).¹¹ In this regard, it is difficult not to recall Madame Vestris's notorious performance of the hero's part in *Giovanni in London* (1820) on account of the novelty of an actress performing breeches parts. In her case, the symmetry of her legs became the object of admiration — and profit — to the point that they were praised in ballads and cast in plaster. They became so popular that the London press echoed the purported robbery of their cast, which was regarded as an extremely valuable item ('London

Police: Madame Vestris's Legs' 326). According to *The Spirit of the Times*, 'The town ran in crowds to see Madame Vestris's legs' ('Madame Vestris' 204). This is something her theatre manager took advantage of, as *The Musical World* reveals: 'her performance [...] caused Fame to sound her trumpet with unusual force, so that the treasury of *Old Drury* experienced the most beneficial effects' ('The Late Madame Vestris' vol. 34, no. 35, 30 Aug. 1856, 531). This — as Janice Norwood observes — would not be the case with Mrs. Lane, who performed breeches roles until she was in her seventies, and whose (less alluring) physical appearance never drew the attention of the press ('Picturing Nineteenth-Century Female Theatre Managers' 18).

The absence of this controversial role from Madame Vestris's offering during her American tour was regarded by some newspapers as evidence of the Mathews's condescending attitude towards an audience they deemed prudish and immature. *The Knickerbocker* imputed the 'complete omission of all male personations in [Madame Vestris's] American engagement' to 'a high sense of the refined delicacy of the Americans' (C. 366). Some newspapers, however, seem to have deliberately ignored that Madame Vestris's performance of breeches roles had raised different reactions in her own country, that ranged from concern at the indecency of the part to enthusiasm towards her aptness for the role. *The Theatrical Inquisitor* — when reviewing *Giovanni in London* — had alluded to 'the extreme indecency which runs through every vein of this stupid composition' ('Giovanni in London' 393). This same periodical, however, did not seem to resent Madame Vestris's impersonation of Macheath at *The Haymarket*. Having conceded that 'criticism is capricious', it declared that her enactment of the role was 'the most amusing personation in which we have hitherto beheld her' ('Beggar's Opera' 82).

If we take into account the high number of ill-willed allusions to her loose morals, which looked with suspicion on every detail of her private life¹² — from her first and second marriages, to the list of her alleged lovers — the absence of *Don Giovanni* from her programme does not come as a surprise. This, however, was regretted by some who were anxious to see the famous actress in the role that had presumably brought about her universal fame. In this regard, Rachel Cowgill suggests that 'Vestris's travesty of the libertine challenge[d] and manipulate[d] accepted boundaries of gender, sexuality and desire, articulating and objectifying subversive currents within late Georgian society to an extent that both disturbed and exhilarated her London audiences' (66), an idea echoed by Jacky Bratton, who deems her 'dangerously attractive' in her transvestite representations (123-24; 125), and also present in Kathy Fletcher. The New York monthly magazine *The Knickerbocker* described the fascination

actresses in male costume could exert upon their audiences, and concluded: 'One great attraction of Madame Vestris's art was thus entirely abandoned; and this [...] may account for her want of success' (C. 366).

In *The Drama's Levée*, Planché draws special attention to Madame Vestris's pioneering and valuable contribution as manager of the *Olympic*, an appraisal fully shared by *The Gentleman's Magazine*, that concludes: 'She transformed [the Olympic] into the most elegant 'temple of the drama' in London. Assisted by an admirable company, and having at her command the freshest and smartest dramatic authors then on town, her theatre soon became the most popular in the metropolis' ('Madame Vestris – Mrs. Mathews' 388).¹³ Madame Vestris's authority was recognized by all the members of her stable company – that chorus of deities from the successful mythological burlesques written by Planché and Dance, who sing: 'First of school, Olympus owned her rule, / We all flew her call to obey' (28). This call to systematic rehearsals of their parts was personally supervised by Madame Vestris as a means of counteracting the venomous darts of the censorious critics sitting in the pit, their 'undeserved lash' (14), however, could not harm a perfect combination of good scripts, performed by a vivacious actress surrounded by a well-trained ensemble¹⁴ in a 'pretty', 'little' theatre where the pieces' play on words and witty allusions could be delivered in a natural style,¹⁵ and deciphered by the educated patrons she succeeded in attracting to her theatre – those patrons whose 'fostering smile' she regarded as responsible for her success (29). Aware that she was embarking on an unknown enterprise, she hoped for a similar reception in her new destiny: 'I know that Censure's somewhere in the pit, / But Praise can smother him if you think fit' (29). However, the uncertainty of their behaviour made her anxiously say: 'Let not his frown my future's dream o'er cast' (29). Although Censure's frown did overcast her dream, the clues that *The Drama's Levée* gives us on the reasons for her successful reception in England lead us to think that a more careful selection of pieces, with a substantial adaptation for their American audiences, performed in an acting style better suited to their tastes,¹⁶ surrounded by well-trained companies of actors, in a less competitive atmosphere, would have proved more rewarding to that actress who – on her return to her Olympic Theatre – was greeted with such enthusiasm that raised the complaints of American reviewers.¹⁷

Notes

¹ She had leased the theatre and obtained licence to perform *burlettas* on December 6, 1830.

² Planché's views on Madame Vestris's excellent management would remain unchanged throughout his life, as the publication in 1879 of a letter addressed to her forty-three years earlier, shows ('Appendix', 285).

³ According to Clifford Williams, 'both these gentlemen wanted to present Madame and Charles in America. Terms were discussed and it was decided that Price's \$20,000, with the possibility of more to be made, was the better offer' (127).

⁴ This would not be the first time both theatres tried to secure the services of a successful actor, as had been the case with Edwin Forrest, recently engaged by Mr Wallack, 'Mr Forrest has left the *Park* [...] his services have been secured by the manager of the *National*' ('Theatricals', vol. 9, Oct. 1838, 298).

⁵ This role had been created by the American emerging playwright Robert Montgomery Bird for his play *Gladiator*.

⁶ The opposite is the case with American critics, who suggest turning to American authors as the means for unsuccessful actresses, such as Ellen Tree or Madame Vestris, to recover their popularity with audiences. Ellen Tree is given the following piece of advice, 'Let her [Ellen Tree] look to our native authors; she will reap a harvest in fame and fortune' ('Theatricals' vol. 10, Nov. 1838, 48), whereas Madame Vestris is advised to 'encourage the rising talent of the country by producing new plays from the pens of American authors' ('Theatricals', vol. 10, Jan. 1839, 150).

⁷ Not all American critics seem to have shared this viewpoint, as the following statement reveals, 'Why will our managers endeavour to announce all their novelties as imported, or, as having been polished by an engagement at a foreign theatre? [...] Let us take some delight in encouraging our own artists' ('Theatricals' vol. 10, Dec. 1838, 98).

⁸ It must be born in mind that, as Lhamon points out, Rice's role was particularly successful with racially mingled neighbourhoods, which 'shared much more integrated life experiences' (11). Accordingly, Jim Crow's presumable blazoning of American labouring values (8) would probably not work to the same degree on both sides of the Atlantic, in spite of which we share Lhamon's contention that 'Jim Crow proved too slippery and multisignificant to police' (3).

⁹ Interestingly, the quality of novelists was measured along the same lines, as the praise of the English novelist H.W. Herbert, shows, 'It is true, Mr. Herbert is an Englishman, but he has resided in America for years, and has become, as it were, deeply imbued with our national feeling and institutions' ('Literary Review' 49).

¹⁰ The limited number of new pieces in Ellen Tree's theatrical offering would also be regarded as responsible for the cold reception she met with at the Park Theatre ('Theatricals' vol. 10, Nov. 1838, 48).

¹¹ Janice Norwood, in *Lives of Shakespearean Actors*, draws attention to the striking similarities between Mrs. Honey and Vestris, both of whom became famous for their personation of male roles (24).

¹² For a detailed account of the most notorious publications related to her private life, see Alan Fischler (313-21).

¹³ For a detailed account of Madame Vestris's innovations as manager of the *Olympic*, see Richards (75), Bratton (123-24), and Fischler (308-11).

¹⁴ *The Corsair*, while discussing Madame Vestris's success at *The Olympic* following her failed American tour, highlights the relevance of her strong acting company: 'Vestris meets with more favor and success at the *Olympic* than she did at the *Park*. However, she is powerfully supported by veteran Farren, her own '*Dear Charles*', Mrs. Nisbett [...], Mrs. Orger, and our old friend little Keeley' ('London Theatricals' 14).

¹⁵ This type of theatre was well suited, as 'Drama' observes, to that type of acting style: 'It's very pretty, but it's very small. / Yet it has one advantage, by no means slight, / They *could* both see and hear me if they *might*' [*Italics in the original*] (25).

¹⁶ Her 'natural' acting style would not be appreciated by American audiences until much later, as the success of Edwin Booth's 'natural' enactment of Shakespearean roles in 1865 shows. *The Atlantic Monthly* would claim in this respect that Edwin Booth played Shakespeare, 'neither like his father nor like Forrest, but with a new poetic naturalism' (Eaton 247).

¹⁷ *The Corsair* said, 'There is a great deal of twaddle in many English papers on the enthusiastic reception of Vestris on the boards of her own little theatre in Wych Street -the *Olympic*', and maliciously depicted 'her friends and idolizers blowing off the roof of the *Olympic* with their 'seven minutes and a half cheering' at her cuts on the Yankees' ('London Theatricals' 14).

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