

Performing the Female Alternative in Victorian Popular Drama: The “Girl of the Period” and the “Fast Girl”¹

Victoria PUCHAL TEROL

Author:

Victoria Puchal Terol
Universidad Católica de Valencia San Vicente
Mártir, Spain
mv.puchal@ucv.es
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9692-259X>

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Abstract:

During the nineteenth century, theatregoing became the favoured entertainment of both the lower and upper classes in London. As Davis (1994, 307) suggests, the plays were a “mirrored reflection” of society, and they had the ability to reflect important socio-political issues on stage, while also influencing people’s opinion about them. Thus, by turning to the popular stage of the mid-century we can better understand social issues like the Woman Question, or the tensions around imperial policies, among others. As such, this article scrutinises the ways in which Victorian popular drama influenced the period’s ideal of femininity by using stock characters inspired by real women’s movements. Two such cases are the “Girl of the Period” and the “Fast Girl”, protofeminists that would go on to influence the New Woman of the fin-de-siècle. We analyse two plays from the mid-century: the Adelphi’s *Our Female American Cousin* (1860), by Charles Gayler, and the Strand’s *My New Place* (1863), by Arthur Wood. As this article attests, popular plays like these would inadvertently bring into the mainstream the ongoing political fight for female rights through their use of transgressive female characters and promotion of scenarios where alternative feminine identities could be performed and imagined.

Keywords: Victorian theatre; Victorian popular drama; Girl of the Period; Fast Girl; theatre and feminism

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1. Introduction

When we think about literature during the Victorian period in England, we often forget about popular drama. For the non-Victorianist, English theatre during the nineteenth century is usually represented by two names: Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. But the truth is, even though both authors rightfully earned their global fame as masters of satire and social commentary, there were many more names that did not make it to the annals of literary history. While Wilde and Shaw might be representative of the *fin-de-siècle* theatrical scene, we should look to the rest of the century to get a broader idea of the period's performance culture.

Prior to the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843, a few selected venues in London—Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and the Haymarket—held the monopoly of “legitimate” drama. This meant that serious spoken drama—tragedy and comedy—could only be performed in these venues. The dramatic repertoire was thus significantly limited as the plays that fit into the “legitimate” category were most likely to be Shakespearean adaptations, or the more modern creations of Richard Sheridan. At the same time, other “non-patent” theatres struggled to innovate, interspersing musical interludes with dramatic scenes to attract the general public. After the lifting of restrictions in 1843, however, other theatres were finally allowed to perform various dramatic genres and a shift from a “legitimate” culture to an “illegitimate” culture occurred (Moody 2000, 10; Newey 2005, 6). Nevertheless, it was not until the 1850s and 60s that the economy allowed for the creation of new theatrical venues around London, which, combined with the rise of the music hall, favoured the proliferation of the popular genres (Davis and Emeljanow 2004, 94; Bratton 2011, 57-58). After years of restrictions, music and dancing could be performed outside the patent theatres despite the criticism of moralists, who still condemned popular performance as lowbrow or inappropriate. The Examiner of Plays, appointed by the Lord Chamberlain, controlled all playscripts before their debut, and was able to censor whatever he thought unsuitable for public performance. Despite his efforts, the most successful playwrights and actors dodged censorship with double-entendres, puns, and nonverbal communication. In this way, mid-Victorian theatre was much more than simply the written script.

For the modern scholar, the multi-layered nature of Victorian theatre might be considered an impediment. To address this problem, Marcus suggests that scholars “read Victorian plays—but don't just read them; read about them, peruse visual and verbal accounts of the people who staged and watched them, read them aloud, try to block and perform them, set them to music, imagine them with costumes and lights and contraptions and scenery” (2012, 446). In other words, to fully

comprehend the Victorians’ “catholicity of experience” (Davis 2012, 20), we must scrutinise the period’s socio-political background and establish its links with popular performance, as they are inextricably bound together. In the end, Victorian theatre will prove to be an invaluable source of information about the daily lives of the Victorians and will shed light on one of the most interesting periods of history.

This article scrutinises the way in which popular drama both influenced and reflected the ongoing social debates of the time, more precisely those concerned with modern gender roles. In the first section, we discuss the so-called “age of equipoise” (Burn 1964) and establish the links between a progressively modern metropolis and the myriad forms of entertainment available to both visitors and natives. As we shall see, after the Theatre Act Regulation of 1843 and the ensuing aura of respectability attempted by the Examiner of Plays, stages struggle to juxtapose salacious plots with traditional decorum. Performative culture during the mid-century turns to music and playful representation, perhaps as a way of processing the period’s changing social and political reality. It is, in the end, the period in which “more performances in more theatres were seen by more people than in any other period” (Shepherd and Womack 1996, 219).

In the second section, we examine the mid-century’s shifting perspective on femininity, paying especial attention to the 1850s and 60s. Here we analyse the pressing *Woman Question*, a conundrum for the more traditional side of British society who feared the “loss of femininity” of England’s daughters. Hence, amidst the first steps taken towards a more inclusive society in which women’s education and civil rights were being reconsidered, conservative magazines and newspapers published articles advocating for traditional femininity. Specifically, we will focus on Eliza Lynn Linton’s *Saturday Review* article, “The Girl of the Period” (1868), and we will discuss the contemporary type of women it condemned. As the second section of this article attests, Linton’s warning about the decline of the country’s morality and the proliferation of brand-new “Girls of the Period” and “fast girls”—who most certainly, preceded the *fin-de-siècle*’s New Woman—was a mere reflection of fear and antagonism towards ongoing attempts towards modernity.

In the third section, we will see two examples of the “Girl of the Period”, or “Fast Girl” on the popular stage. The plays selected, Charles Gayler’s *Our Female American Cousin* (April 30, 1860) and Arthur Wood’s *My New Place* (November 19, 1863), are representative of the comic farce of the mid-century.² Both plays

2 Both the official British Library record and Nicoll (1946) attribute *My Female American Cousin* to “C. Galen”. However, *The Adelphi Theatre Calendar Project* recognises the authorship of Charles Gayler. There is no consensus on the correct spelling, as the contemporary reviews of his plays published in British newspapers spell the author’s surname both as “Gaylor” and “Gayler”. I have decided to use the latter spelling, following *The Adelphi Theatre Calendar Project* and numerous obituaries published after the author’s death in 1892.

were first staged in the West End, the hotspot of Victorian London's theatrical life. The Adelphi and the Strand theatres, where the plays were respectively performed, were both located on the Strand, "an old road linking the City and the Town" that ran parallel to the Thames (Bratton 2011, 35). It was a bustling street, which not only delimited the southern borders of the West End, but also served as the hub of the printing district. As we shall see, Gayler's and Wood's female protagonists embody the kind of transgressive femininity of which Linton would warn her readers a couple of years later. On stage, the primitive "Girl of the Period" boasts of her "fastness", that is, a tendency towards the superficial and a rejection of traditional gender norms.

The final section summarises the main ideas and questions raised in this article, further establishing the characters from our case-studies as comic figures that simplify the efforts of their real-life, middle-class female contemporaries, who were attempting to find their place in a rapidly changing society.

2. The "Age of Equipoise" and Popular Entertainment

In 1851, the Great Exhibition was inaugurated in the gleaming Crystal Palace in London's Hyde Park. Queen Victoria herself described inauguration day as "one of the greatest and most glorious of our lives" (quoted in Gibbs-Smith 1964, 16). According to Nicoll, the grand event would become a "symbol of an age that was passing away and the premonition of an age that was to come" (1946, 7), kick-starting the prosperous mid-century and trying to make amends for the bleak 1840s, which were sombrely linked with Ireland's Great Famine and the emigration crisis. As hoped, the Great Exhibition was just a prelude to the bountiful decades that would come on the back of improvements in transport and communication that enabled the country to continue projecting its global power internationally. A couple of years later, and to ensure the metropolis' global importance, London opened its doors again to celebrate the inauguration of the International Exhibition in 1862. Inspired by its predecessor, the International—as it was often called—was located in South Kensington from May to November of that same year and attracted over 6 million visitors in total. As an international event, the exhibition would transform the capital into an open space for education and interchange, welcoming people from different upbringings and cultures and promoting ideas of hospitality. It would also provide the basis for London's South Kensington museums and, in the long term, both exhibitions would promote the growing influx of visitors to the metropolis' theatres (Thomson 2006, 229).

As Burn (1964) argued, the Great Exhibition of 1851 marked the beginning of "the mid-Victorian equipoise", the apparent peaceful atmosphere that predominated in Britain during the 1850s and 60s. Both the Great Exhibition

and the following London International Exhibition of 1862 were essential in the formation of a national identity, as they attempted to bring the citizens of Britain together and encourage their acceptance of the social hierarchy. Incidentally, Hoffenberg identifies both exhibitions as “not only signs of equipoise, but also the living and material experience of such equipoise” (2017, 42). In other words, both events were physical manifestations of Britain’s steady advance as a prosperous Empire, and proof of its citizens’ cultural dominance. However, as Hewitt’s [2000] (2017) review of Burn’s theory of mid-Victorian equipoise suggests, we might argue that these public, massive events were a mere distraction from what was really going on behind the scenes, both outside the country—the Crimean War (1853-1856), the Second Opium War (1856-1860), and the Indian Rebellion of 1857, to name a few—and within, where pressing social issues such as the *Woman Question* and the creation of Trade Unions threatened traditionally minded individuals.

From the 1860s and up until the 1880s, museums doubled in number, from 90 to 180 in London, testifying to both the renewed appetite for knowledge and the government’s insistence on democratising culture. In the end, the creation of public venues where lower- and middle-class citizen could have access to models of “perfect order and perfect elegance”, as Ruskin (1880, 215) put it, went hand in hand with the incipient rise of educational movements across the country. For instance, the Royal Commission on the State of Popular Education in England established the groundwork, in 1861, for the forthcoming 1870 Elementary Education Act, which mandated that nearly all children—including those from the lower and workingclasses—were to receive minimal elementary education in order to create a responsible citizenship, in consonance with the country’s prosperous times. In other words, if Britain were to compete as a global leader, it needed to have educated citizens, even if they were lower or working class.

However, we could argue that education did not just happen inside public, elegant museums or galleries. Bailey (2003, 23) has identified the dual purpose of “leisure” during the mid-Victorian period; as he contends, leisure could be seen as an “amusement”, an empty activity with no deep purpose. It could also, though, be understood as “recreation”, a rational way of improving oneself by means of an activity. Thus, public spaces specifically addressing citizens’ leisure could simultaneously bring the average citizen closer to entertainment, delight, and, ultimately, knowledge. Such was the case of the reading rooms of the museums, which were somewhat more private, away from public scrutiny and the crowded aisles of the exhibits themselves, or of the *tableaux vivants*, also known as living pictures. These symbolise the duality of entertainment in the city, especially in the West End: as Donohue (2005, 4-7) explains, in all popular entertainment, behind an aura of respectability, moral and social transgression was hiding. In the case of *tableaux vivants*, where immobile costumed actors staged a historical event, a

famous painting, or a literary passage of classical inspiration, a complex interplay of theatrical elements assured the combined result of “elevated taste” and visual appeal (Assael 2006; Monrós-Gaspar 2015). With time, however, *tableaux vivants* crossed the line of propriety and became an excuse to legitimise a kind of voyeurism towards the female figure under the pretence of instruction (Davis 1991, 125), perhaps due to the onlooker’s uncultured background and their lack of appreciation of the pictures represented (Assael 2006). Soon, *tableaux vivants* were also absorbed by light genres such as pantomimes and burlesques, which featured immobile scenes or *tableaux* between acts. As this hybridisation suggests, the entertainments of the mid-century continuously revised and reconfigured traditional forms of leisure and instruction.

This change of perspective could also be found by simply strolling around the metropolis. The improvements in technology, printing, and photography made it possible for Londoners to walk past image-covered shop windows or fences, buy cheap newspapers or journals, and, in other words, participate in the active machinery of the city (Nead 2000). As for the citizens’ appetite for “amusement”, a plethora of dance halls, theatres, circuses, and variety shows would satisfy even the most demanding pleasure-seeker (Bailey 2003, 2014). During the 1860s, public spaces such as the Cremorne Gardens in Chelsea evidenced the duality of London’s popular entertainment offering: by day, the gardens were flocked to by respectable, middle-class families; by night, “fast” men and women of dubious morality sought a different kind of entertainment (*The Spectator* September 9, 1865, 1000-1001).

Of all the forms of entertainment available in the mid-Victorian metropolis, theatregoing was the most popular. Amidst the rapid growth of the city and the appetite of the masses for entertainment, a plethora of shows and performances of diverse nature promised to surprise and amuse the onlooker. Theatre was not, though, simply a gateway to the fantastical or spectacular: above all, it “staged explorations of the physical world of the city, the representation of changing social relationships between classes and genders, and the playing out and resolution of social anxieties and problems” (Newey 2010, 126). Theatregoing was much more than hollow entertainment: it was a collective experience, a process by which people could participate in the national culture. Playwrights and theatre managers catered for audiences’ latest interests, usually exploiting well-known public events, adapting melodies and songs that everyone already knew, and redesigning, night after night, their “repertoires” depending on ever-changing popular mores (Davis 2012, 13). In this way, performance venues became a sort of “laboratory” where new roles and fashions were renegotiated and perfected; as Davis and Holland (2007, 96) contend, “a new conception of social roles and personal identity was being developed and played out both on stage and in the auditorium. The popular theatre, on and off stage, was becoming a new kind

of social process for articulating the texture and conditions of urban life.” After all, it was the “age of crowds”, a period where the public’s opinions, wants, and needs were being constantly verbalised (Daly 2013, 5).

Ultimately, the popular theatre of the mid-century provided a space where characters could be twisted and reconfigured at will; in keeping with the revisionist feeling of the period, light theatrical genres adapted “serious” characters from classic or sensation drama and took inspiration from real events and public figures. To satisfy the theatregoer’s interest in novelty, multiple hybrid genres such as the comedietta or the burlesque were created. As *The Reader* (8 April, 1865) puts it, a comedietta was a “dwarf species of comedy that is not so broad as farce, nor so light as vaudeville, nor so tragic as melodrama”, and it epitomised the mid-century’s efforts to return to “social comedy” (Nicoll 1970, 134). Indeed, the unequivocal influence of social issues in genres such as sensation, as well as the legal atmosphere of the pre-1860s, contributed to a renewed interest in the female figure on stage. In line with theatre’s “mirrored reflection” (Davis 1994, 307), performances could—and did—influence society, intervening in culture, and leaving their imprint on society.

3. New Female Role Models: The “Girl of the Period” and the “Fast Girl”

In accordance with the traditional gender ideology of the first half of the century, the Royal Family served as a model of marriage bliss to all. After her marriage, the Queen was not just seen as a capable monarch, but also, as a successful woman who had fulfilled her sex’s duty; in other words, she had conquered “her household, her children [and] her husband” (*Pall Mall Gazette* June 24, 1869, 12). In the paintings and photographs commissioned by the sovereign during the 1840s to 60s, the Queen would often appear as a *domestic angel*, surrounded by her large family. As an idealised angel-wife, Queen Victoria could be seen as “guide and comfort” for the young women who were still trying to find a place in a male-dominated world (*Macmillan’s Magazine* May 1, 1863, 8).

However, the monarch’s public image changed after the death of Prince Albert in December 1861, and she was transformed into what scholars have called “the invisible Queen” (St. Aubyn 1992, 353; Homans 1998, 58-66). As for many coetaneous women, widowhood posed to Queen Victoria the problem of individual representation and cast a figurative “veil” over her persona (Strachey 1921). Her demeanour in official photographs changed to suffering or longing for her husband: in her mourning clothes, she either cast her eyes downward, or directly to her late husband’s memorial bust (Mayall 1863). Absent from any public engagements until the marriage of her firstborn, Prince Edward—later King Edward VII—to Princess Alexandra of Denmark, her active role as monarch

and *matron* of the country would manifestly be put aside in favour of the younger generations. Nonetheless, Queen Victoria was a popular icon, and she would go on to be included in collective biographies of women, which emphasised her timeless position as a role model for her female subjects; among her many virtues, Davenport (1884, 86) highlighted the Queen's "moral courage, her fortitude, her industry, her elevation of aim, and her tenacity of purpose."

It was, however, not just Queen Victoria who served as a moral guide for Victorian women. The popularity of poems such as Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* (1854), which continued to be reworked and extended up to 1862, revered the figure of the model *celestial* wife or *True Woman*. The *Pall Mall Gazette* described such women as superior to men within their "domestic empire" (June 24, 1869, 12), while the *Morning Advertiser* praised their submissive, modest stance with "eyes bent earthward with unmerited shame" (August 7, 1862, 2). Indeed, the traditional approach to femininity in Britain still placed women in the domestic environment in the mid-century, despite the previous attempts of early proto-feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft and her 1790s' contemporaries to expand the horizons and prospects of women outside the home.

It is interesting to consider Queen Victoria's absence from public life during the mid-century, because as she receded, compelling reformist initiatives intensified. By the 1860s, many middle-class women were asking questions about controversial topics such as a woman's place in society, and fought for a better education, insisting on academic formation and civil rights. Female organisation began through the creation of communities, social gatherings, and women's clubs. Groups such as the Langham Place Circle of Feminists, established in London by Barbara Smith Bodichon and Bessie Rayner Parkes, fought for women's rights. They wrote pamphlets, crusaded around London, and made allegiances with politicians such as John Stuart Mill, who presented a petition for the female vote to the House of Commons in 1867—long before the 1928 Equal Franchise Act that granted the vote to everyone over the age of 21. Still, these early steps towards female emancipation had to be taken carefully; as their writings usually insisted, they did not "intend to convert [...] wives and daughters into politicians, nor to disturb the peace of households" (*London Daily News* June 29, 1866). It was, after all, a matter of raising "public spirit" (*West Middlesex Advertiser and Family Journal* January 5, 1867, 3). As these suggest, women had to be incredibly careful with their words and position, or else they risked their own reputation.

With newspapers such as the *Morning Post* (July 16, 1860, 4) raising questions about the country's immorality with respect to modern times and modern debates, the critics put women under the spotlight: there was a problem with improper male behaviour, but it was the mission of the "young ladies" to stop their advances. At the beginning of the 1860s, the newspapers appealed to women

and their supposed moral and spiritual superiority, demanding their rejection of modern ways. Those who transgressed tradition and welcomed modernity soon received a new descriptive epithet: “fast girls”. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “fast” as “engaging in or involving activities characterised by excitement, extravagance, and risk-taking” (*OED* adj. 6), making clear the period’s conception of the “fast girl”. There were, though, two kinds of “fast girls”: the “not-so-bad” and the “worst kind”. The first kind was described as follows:

[A “fast girl” is] a woman who has lost her respect for men, and for whom men have lost their respect. There may be nothing very bad in her—it is not a question of virtue and vice—but the edge of her modesty is off, and men approach her with a certain feeling of easy insolence. She does something or says something which she is not exactly expected to do or say [...] She bets a little, and drinks a very little, and even sometimes smokes on the sly [...] she never does any work, and will never marry any one but an officer. (*Morning Advertiser* July 31, 1860, 3)

The second type of “fast girl”, the “worst kind”, was not the most common. As the article explains, this kind has the bad habit of talking with men about subjects of dubious propriety and is most likely to be found in London. These young women were usually from fashionable society and were want to “permit men to forget in their presence the line that separates the impure woman from the pure” (*Morning Advertiser* July 31, 1860, 3). Indeed, throughout the rest of the decade the epithet “fast girl” was easily conflated with women of an “off-set” modesty—it was a term usually employed to refer to prostitutes. It was also a descriptive word for those who reconfigured their appearance and behaviour and participated in “male” vices (Boufis [1994] 2010, 101-102). Gossiping, drinking, and smoking were some of the characteristics usually attributed to the “fast girl”—traits that were considered rather *masculine* and that would end up being signifiers of the New Woman of the *fin-de-siècle*. Moreover, a well-known synonym of the “fast girl” is that of “strong-minded woman”. In the end, both epithets served as prejudiced descriptions of the alternative, the girl who strayed from the norm (Monrós-Gaspar 2020).

By the end of the 1860s, and with the bustling feminist scene in London and Manchester, along came another plea for women’s traditional decorum. Amidst the ongoing debate around whether Britain could still take pride in their women, the *Saturday Review* printed an anonymous article entitled *The Girl of the Period* (March 1868). The piece—which turned out to be written by a woman named Eliza Lynn Linton—was extremely successful as it voiced the nation’s concerns about women’s roles and their shifting identities. Linton described the “Girl of the Period” as:

a creature who dyes her hair and paints her face, as the first articles of her personal religion; whose sole idea of life is plenty of fun and luxury; and whose dress is the object of such thought and intellect as she possesses. Her main endeavour in this is to outvie her neighbours in the extravagance of fashion. No matter whether, as in the time of crinolines, she sacrificed decency, or, as now, in the time of trains, she sacrifices cleanliness [...]. With purity of taste she has lost also that far more precious purity and delicacy of perception. (Linton [1868] 1996)

As this excerpt suggests, contemporary women were being criticised for their efforts to look and behave like the “demi-mondaine” or prostitute, rather than like the traditional, fair English maid of the past. As Buszek (2006, 56) explains, the author Henry James commented on Linton’s description of the modern woman and compared her to the professional woman—to actresses, more precisely—who were “accustomed to walk alone in the streets of a great city, and to be looked at by all sorts of people”.

Against this idea of a sole definition of the “Girl of the Period”, Fraser et al. (2003, 22) argue that the “Girl of the Period” is an example of “a multiform being”, or in other words, she represents the multifaceted nature of women from the mid-century as well as the decade’s efforts to debunk simplistic definitions of “woman”. In fact, as Helsinger et al. (1983, 112) attest, an increasing number of mid-Victorian women rejected the imposed dichotomy of “Angel in the House” or “prostitute”, seeking to transgress the norm without “forsaking true womanhood”. There is no single definition of the “Girl of the Period”; publications such as the *Girl of the Period Almanack* and the *Girl of the Period Miscellany* continued to outline a wide array of “Girls of the Period”, whose main characteristic was their deviation from the “girl of the past” (Moruzi 2009, 14). In a way, the epithet allowed for a revision of gender roles, and clarified a generation’s attempt to reconsider what it meant to be a woman. Thus, in the first issue of the *Miscellany*, the editors evoked the real purpose of the “Girl of the Period” in this way: “let us get recognized [...] that marriage is not the sole, or even the chief end of woman. Let us give her work. Let us give her free leave to do whatever a man does, if she can” (*Girl of the Period Miscellany* March 1869, 6). With its all-female editorial board, this magazine gave voice to the opinion of many women of the period who fought for female education and work opportunities, and continued to rebuke the unique, tight definition of womanhood.

The “Girl of the Period” finds its literary response in sensation fiction. The sensation heroine is usually classified as “strong-minded” due to her “unnatural” behaviour (*Morning Post* 22 October 1863, 3) and participates in the mid-century’s questioning of femininity (Pykett 2011, 13). We should not forget that the 1860s were the heyday of sensation fiction and that successful

sensation novels with female protagonists, such as Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), went on to be adapted by other literary genres and adopted multiple forms. Perhaps due to the peak of mass production and consumption of the printed text, the “thrilling crimes, pathetic suffering, and devious villainy” (Eltis 2013, 61) that characterised sensation fiction gripped the public with their salacious plots, where the female protagonist is closer to the “Girl of the Period” than to the *Angel*. However, as we shall discuss in the following section, printed sensation fiction was not the only genre that featured these forms of transgressive femininity. On stage too, the fictional “Girl of the Period” and “fast girl” articulates society’s expectation of women and warns about the perils of losing traditional femininity standards.

4. The Non-Traditional Girl on Stage: The Yankee Girl and the Young English Girl as “Girls of the Period”

As we have previously seen, *The Girl of the Period Almanack* had warned about the multiplicity of the “Girl of the Period”. Accordingly, in this section we shall see two variants that fit Linton’s definition: the American—or Yankee—girl and the young English “fast” girl. Our first selected piece is entitled *Our Female American Cousin* (1860) and was first performed in London’s Adelphi Theatre on April 26, 1860.³ Gayler, the author, clearly references Tom Taylor’s successful farce *Our American Cousin* (Laura Keene’s Theatre, New York, October 15, 1858; Haymarket, London, November 11, 1861). Taylor’s farce was inextricably linked to the shift in leisure and entertainment that was occurring in Britain during the mid-century; as Banham (1985, 15) notes, Taylor wrote *Our American Cousin* after American tourists “flocked to the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851” and it evidenced the cultural differences between Americans and Britons.⁴

Gayler’s inspiration in Taylor’s *Our American Cousin* is evident in his shaping of the female protagonist. In Taylor’s farce, the American protagonist is a man

3 All the following quotes from the play have been taken from the original manuscript, which is stored at the British Library in London, with reference Add. MS 52992 M.

4 Asa Trenchard was played by actor Joseph Jefferson in the original cast of *Our American Cousin*. However, it was Lord Dundreary, a stock comic character, who made an impression on the audience. In the years following the premiere, playwrights on both sides of the Atlantic created spin-offs of the original story, giving prominence to Lord Dundreary and his “Dundrearyisms” (Fisher 2015, 336). Coincidentally, Gayler wrote *Our American Cousin At Home; or, Lord Dundreary Abroad* (1860), and H. J. Byron—an acclaimed English burlesque playwright—penned *Dundreary Married and Done For* (1864), originally for the Haymarket in London (Davis 1984).

named Asa Trenchard, a cousin that arrives in England to claim an inheritance and ends up marrying a poor girl, despite the tight social class boundaries. Similarly, in Gayler's *Our Female American Cousin*, the main character is Pamela, a young American girl who travels to Britain to meet her English relatives, the Appleby family. Like Asa Trenchard, Pamela has to get past her family's prejudice and criticism about her "coarse" manners, but ends up engaged to Gerald Appleby, her British cousin and heir to the Appleby estate. However, we can observe a clear contrast between the status of the two protagonists: while Trenchard occupies a position of power even before his arrival in Britain—he is the heir and the British Trenchards are therefore at his mercy—Pamela is at a distinct disadvantage because she is just the daughter of the long-lost brother of the Appleby patriarch.

The role of Pamela was originally performed by the American actress Julia Daly, Gayler having expressly written it for her. Daly's reputation as a singer and actress on the other side of the Atlantic facilitated her popularity in London, especially after her success as Pamela at the Adelphi; after all, the role of the "Yankee Girl" was her specialty (*The Players* June 23, 1860, 201). Accordingly, years after her first British performance as Gayler's female American cousin, the country's newspapers continued to describe her as an "eccentric American actress" (*The Illustrated London News* February 23, 1871, 183), and considered her the "unrivalled representative of the 'Irish and Yankee Gal'" (*The Era Almanack Advertiser* 1871). As the newspapers suggest, even though Julia Daly was an American, she specialised in the stock comic characters of the *Yankee* and the Irish girl. Besides *Our Female American Cousin*, in which she plays an American, she also starred in *The Irish Girl in America*, the theatrical adaptation of Mary Anne Sadlier's novel *Bessy Conway; or, The Irish Girl in America* (1861). As Murphy (1998) suggests, the literature of the mid-nineteenth century reinforces the stock character of the immigrant Irish servant girl, in both a comic and a dramatic light. When used in comedy, the "Irish gal" is usually an ignorant servant who is unaware of the rules of American or British society. She is impolite, makes inappropriate comments that make the audience laugh, and, in general, she is unable to fit into respectable society.

Something similar happens to the stereotypical American or *Yankee* girl. As Pamela, Daly exaggerates the vulgar manners of the modern American girl, which are compared with the meek character of the English-born, middle-class woman. Indeed, Pamela's transgressive femininity is evidenced by her rough speech and her unruly behaviour while she is at her relatives' English home. The *Morning Advertiser* described Daly in her role as Pamela as "a popular delineator of American eccentricities" (June 20, 1860), while the *Morning Post* attested to her capacity to "mirror" reality through a "magnifying glass of extraordinary

power” (May 1, 1860). Due to the news from a socially convoluted America arriving every day, both the critics and the English audience would have been up to date on the American women’s rights movement. Additionally, echoes of American feminism and Britain’s own problem with the *Woman Question*, would perfectly frame Daly’s character in the minds of the audience. In the play, Lady Appleby apparently verbalises the public’s expected reaction after hearing about the arrival of the American girl in the Appleby household; Lady Appleby, the matriarch and Pamela’s aunt, assumes Pamela’s lack of position in respectable society and compares her to a “savage”:

LADY APPLEBY: A savage from America? Good gracious, I hope you will keep her caged. (Gayler 1860, f.7)

Evidently, the London stage revels in the go-aheadism of American society—and especially of American women—as markers of the social changes some British women were embarked upon. Two years after the first performance of *Our Female American Cousin*, novelist and critic Anthony Trollope would publish his memoirs recounting his American travels, *North America* (1862). Trollope’s social commentary on American society and American women foregrounds the “improper” and “misbehaving female” of the period (*The Athenaeum* May 24, 1862, 687). As Trollope puts it, the contrast between “ladylike” and “vulgar”, though apparent in England, is far stronger in America, where women can be “either charming or odious” (*The Athenaeum* May 24, 1862, 687).

In *Our Female American Cousin*, Pamela is represented as a coarse-mannered girl who destabilises the respectability of an English family due to her easy-goingness around men, her lack of respect for her older relatives, and her free mobility both inside and outside the family home. As a representative of the growing American Women’s Rights movement, Pamela brings to the London stage a threatening picture of the incipient future of British women; a future of which Linton would warn about a few years later in her *Girl of the Period* article. In the end, Pamela’s role not only caricatures the contemporary modern American girl, but also reminds the audience of the country’s own femininity problem. However, some critics suggest that Daly “breaks a lance for her countrywomen” and reverses the popular conception of the vulgar American woman (*The Players* June 23, 1860, 201). Even though Gayler’s comedietta is packed with “Americanisms”, as some newspapers suggest, and the acting of Julia Daly is particularly focused on accentuating the mannerisms of the stereotypical modern American girl, her final address to the audience reminds them of the artificiality of the role; as Pamela states at the end of the play, this image of the American woman only exists in the audience’s imagination:

PAMELIA: I have shown you your idea of an American Woman, such a type as I am proud to say, only exists in the imagination of old time story writers.
(Gayler 1860, f.31)

Nevertheless, Daly's final tag is weak in its assertion, for the message that comes across after witnessing the whole play is precisely the opposite. Daly's stereotypical manners as a celebrated Yankee girl are in fact reminiscent of the much-condemned "fast girls" and "Girls of the Period". Daly's reputation seems inescapable, much like the "Girl of the Period" epithet was for some women. While Daly profited from her fame as the model "Yankee Girl", other actresses mocked the artificial stereotype and capitalised on the public's erroneous perception of modern femininity off stage. Years after Daly's memorable performance as Pamela, English actress Lydia Thompson took advantage of her own public image as a modern, "fast girl" and posed for a series of photographs in order to turn a profit from her ridiculous reputation.⁵ Like Pamela in Gayler's comedietta, Thompson satirises and exaggerates the public's assumption about the modern "Girl of the Period" and takes it to the extreme (Buszek 2006, 56-59). In America, Thompson and her troupe of "British Blondes" collected both admirers and detractors due to their performances of burlesque adaptations, extravagant costumes, and *fast* behaviour both inside and outside theatres (Gänzl [2002] 2014). In accordance with her public image, Thompson's photographs from 1868 depict her holding a fashionable riding crop, with her bouffant hair arranged in an ostentatiously long braid, which is topped off by a racy taxidermy squirrel hat. Moreover, Thompson sports a monocle, smokes a cigarette, and holds a riding crop, all the masculine markers that her coetaneous critics warned the readers about. In this way, Thompson successfully appropriates the condescending stereotype of the "fast girl" and uses it to her advantage.

As the character of Pamela suggests, and as Thompson attempted to prove with her photographs, young women were especially scrutinised during the 1860s, no matter their nationality. The comic genre is fixated upon the young women's future role in the "domestic ideal", which mainly consists of "a kindly uxorious husband" and a "loving wife who dutifully submits herself to her husband's authority in all matters except for those of housekeeping trivia" (Booth 2004, 131). Essentially, the comic popular stage explores the delimited role of women and exploits their possibilities for propriety or impropriety in both their private and public life. Victorian popular drama, especially burlesque, farce, comedietta

5 Thompson's *carte-de-visites* can be consulted online at the Billy Rose Theatre Division of The New York Public Library Digital Collections (<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-56da-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>)

and the like, tended to expose the period’s preoccupations: as Fisher (1988, 652) attests, “because of their reliance on fantasy and the incredible incident, these forms can mask their serious issues with frivolity, self-parody, and musical spectacle, trivialising their serious concerns, and rendering morbid or sentimental their lighter themes”. In the case of *Pamelia*, we see her as a deviation from the domestic ideal, a travelling woman whose unrestricted mobility and behaviour earn her the epithet “savage”, as we have previously seen. We cannot understand *Pamelia*, the “Yankee girl”, if we are not aware of the dominant discourse against *bloomerism*.⁶ On stage, the Yankee girl comes alive in front of the audience, who witness an anomalous female identity that they had so often heard or read about outside the theatrical venue. In the end, as *Pamelia* reminds us at the end of the play, she might only exist in her critics’ imagination. In a way, she is inadvertently warning everyone about the invented constructions of femininity that were proliferating during the period.

The mid-Victorian stage is also interested in the debates on female public and private spaces in the Victorian city. In light comedy, we can visit gendered spaces such as the drawing room at a lady’s home, shops, or even boarding schools for girls. The latter are sometimes also known as “finishing schools”, where the daughters of upper-middle class families were sent to learn the necessary skills before their coming out into society. These are perfect examples of gendered spaces: peeking into a boarding school—though fictitious—assimilates the experience of entering a lady’s boudoir, a private space where the identity of the young girl is being formed in a controlled environment. Such settings had the same attraction for the spectator as the exotic seraglios described by adventurers such as Richard Burton. To be able to observe a young woman in a female-only space allows us to understand the process of the creation of female identity.

In popular comic drama, the male protagonist will often go out of his way to gain access to such feminised spaces. Such is the case in our second piece, the Strand’s farce *My New Place* (Wood, November 19, 1863), where the male protagonist, Tom Larkspur, trespasses in a girls’ boarding school after briefly conversing with Jenny, a young student.⁷ The farce introduced the now-forgotten

6 Amelia Bloomer was the editor of *Lily*, an American journal that promoted women’s rights. In 1851, she published an article advocating a change in female fashion, describing the advantages of wearing a shortened skirt with full trousers underneath. Soon, the press named this style “the Bloomer”. The term *bloomerism* went on to epitomise the changing gender ideology of the mid-century, and it quickly became a synonym for feminism. Because of Bloomer’s nationality, *bloomerism* was typically associated with American society, even though it also reached Britain. See more about *bloomerism* and Amelia Bloomer in Cunningham (2003, 31-74).

7 The Lord Chamberlain’s Catalogue of Plays records the character’s name as ‘Jenny’ in the original manuscript (Add. MS 53027 K); however, *The Illustrated London News* indicates

author and actor Arthur Wood onto the London stage, even though it did not leave much of an imprint in the Strand. The *London Daily News* (November 24, 1863) classified it as “not at all deficient in vulgarity”, perhaps because the farce exploits the risky adventure of Tom, who dresses as a female to get inside the girls’ school. Cross-dressing might not have been a problem, as the audience was more than accustomed to seeing actors and actresses in *travesti*; after all, popular genres did break down the sexual codes of the period (Fisher 1988, 652). However, it is surprising that Wood’s farce escaped the censorship of the Examiner of Plays as it features a particularly controversial and eroticised scene in which Tom chases the young students to kiss them while he is disguised as a female (Wood 1863, f.18).

Even though Tom Larkspur is clearly the protagonist of the farce, it is the string of “fast”, flirty girls that dream of leaving the school to pursue other romantic journeys that catch our attention. The main female character is Jenny, a “romping” girl (Wood 1863, f.1). We soon see that her behaviour is considered “threatening” and “corrupting”; while the girls are under the scrutiny of the “spinster” school mistress, Miss Virginia Verjuice, they must conceal their blatant flirting with visiting men. The mistress, in accordance with the role of the older generation, oversees and restricts the girls’ romantic musings, prohibiting certain topics of conversation and the reading of materials such as Lord Byron’s *Don Juan* (Wood 1863, f.12). To prevent Jenny from “polluting” her school with her libertine and *fast* example, Miss Verjuice insists on locking her away:

MISS VERJ: (to JENNY) when you have dined, you will [...] remain in that closet until you are sent for [...] I cannot permit your example to corrupt the minds of my young charges. You will therefore bring your tasks and follow me to that room, where I desire you will continue, and I hope will reflect on your conduct (Wood 1863, f.8-9)

In Miss Verjuice’s words we can hear the echoes of the older generations who insisted on censoring the modern types of femininity. As the strict matron of the school, she symbolises traditionally minded individuals. The audience knows that Miss Verjuice’s task is not an easy one; she is in charge of young female students whose attention is directed to “fast” conducts rather than to reading deep philosophical texts (Wood 1863, f.12). In this way, Miss Verjuice’s attempts to stop the girls from misbehaving come across as ridiculous and comic; for

that she was renamed ‘Fanny’ (November 28, 1863). The following transcripts belong to the manuscript version and so I have decided to use the original name.

instance, she makes Jenny wear a veil in order to keep her from the view of “the libertine”, or male trespasser:

MISS VERJ: (to JENNY) Here, at least you are secure from the insidious approaches of the reprobate. We must have no lures here to catch the unsteady eyes of the libertine—so, in future, Miss Trentham, you will always wear a veil and walk with me.

JENNY: Well, I don't care. There, then. When you were of our age, you were not so particular, I dare say. That is, if you could get any one to look at you at all and I don't believe you could unless you are very much altered. (Wood 1863, f.13-14)

Jenny's response is to attack Miss Verjuice for her beauty—or rather, her lack thereof. Again, Jenny seems to have little respect for Miss Verjuice's generation, and after being reprimanded, she accuses her schoolmates of being hypocritical:

JENNY: I don't mind if I do leave your school and never come back there then, I'd sooner be a Jamaica slave! I would! And I'll never try to learn my lessons again, there, I won't! and Miss Jones and Miss Green are sanctified hypocrites, they are! They are as bad as I am when they have the opportunity for't, nasty things! Miss Green always nods to the man with the bulls eyes, and Miss Jones writes v-v-valentines to the b-b-baker (*sobbing*) (Wood 1863, f.14)

Barbara Smith Bodichon had argued three years earlier at the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science meeting of 1860 that the schools were still in need of providing a “sound, general education” for girls, one that would eliminate the existing “vanity” and “false ideals of what is lady-like” (*The English Woman's Journal* November 1860, 6). In turn, the popular drama shows finishing schools and boarding schools for girls as self-contained spaces where the girl is *unpolluted* by outside perversities. On stage, the finishing school is revealed as a re-creation of the domestic environment, where traditional feminine identities are forced upon the *prisoner* girls. However, dramatic criticism makes the audience think about the struggling young women, whose resistance to the gender rules is manifested in their *fastness* and in their desire to escape such spaces. In a way, and as Linton would suggest a few years later, society's obligation was to protect these young minds—to behave as a sort of Miss Verjuice—to prevent the ultimate pollution of the “soft sex”.

4. Conclusion

As we have seen, these representations of modern, fast women during the 1860s are not perceived as positive; instead, the playwrights go to great lengths to portray an uncomfortable new definition of femininity. As Pamela and Jenny exemplify, the “fast girl” and “Girl of the Period” provokes in the audience rejection or, at most, laughter, but not understanding. On the popular stage, these women are risible figures, perhaps mere tools for processing the ongoing debates on *proper* femininity. However, their existence evidences the relevance of transgressive female identities in the first place.

In the first sections of this article, we have seen how the performative culture in London developed hand-in-hand with a culture of entertainment. The celebration of big events in the capital further contributed to the blurring of the line that separated “entertainment” and “metropolis” and made the city a spectacle in itself. It is within this scenario that new role models of femininity transgressed traditional standards and served as inspiration for many. First the “fast girl”, and then the “Girl of the Period”, were deemed such because of their outspoken verbalisation of the anxieties of mid-century women. While the first feminist groups of the period still had to be careful with their words in order to be taken seriously, the stereotypical “fast girl” dressed and behaved as she liked. It was, after all, a deviation from the “girl of the past” (Moruzi 2009, 14).

This social context is reflected on the popular stages of London. Lighter comic genres like the *comediotta* cast aside formal restrictions and turned to social commentary. In between jokes, puns, and double-entendres, the audience was given the opportunity to reflect on the ongoing social debates, and process their fast-changing society. After all, and as we have seen in this article, the theatrical venue also became a place for instruction.

On stage, the myriad identities of women were oversimplified and manipulated. We have seen the examples of two almost forgotten plays, an abounding type of the period. Both the *Adelphi* and the *Strand* were extremely popular with both affluent and working-class citizens because of their light satirical plays (Booth 1991, 53, 196; Davis and Emeljanow 2002, 186). Thus, neither Pamela, the American girl, nor Jenny, the fast young English girl, would have involved much of a shock for regular theatregoers. As we have discussed, the audience would have identified in Pamela and Jenny the feminist trend of the period and they would even have been reminded of specific events recounted in the press. In short, these characters prepared the audience for the forthcoming decades, when groups of real women would continue to subvert the norm.

Finally, we can argue that the “fast girl” and the “Girl of the Period” are both precursors of the *fin-de-siècle* New Woman. At the end of the century, *New Women*

were still being compared to the “fast girl” (*Punch* October 3, 1896, 158), and they still struggled to move beyond the traditional definition of womanhood. For instance, the American or “Yankee gal”, whose coarseness makes pristine British society feel uncomfortable in the mid-century, was revived at the end of the century in social plays such as Oscar Wilde’s *A Woman of No Importance* (1894). In Wilde’s play, the young Hester Worsley becomes an outspoken observer of English customs, wittily commenting on the social situation of British women during the *fin-de-siècle* and denouncing the hypocrisy of British society. Unlike Gayler’s Pamela in *Our Female American Cousin*, however, Hester Worsley is seen as an elevated, refined version of femininity. On the other hand, the fast young English girl of the mid-century, unable to find a place in respectable society, continues to cause controversy even at the end of the Victorian period. Like Jenny in Wood’s *My New Place*, they were still reprimanded by the older generations, who insisted on metaphorically concealing them behind a veil or, in other words, in keeping them from scrutiny.

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