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The First Actresses: Nell Gwyn to Sarah Siddons

Gillian Perry

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Featuring a range of large-scale, public and more intimate portraits of actresses, The First Actresses provides a vivid spectacle of femininity, fashion and theatricality from Nell Gwyn to Sarah Siddons. Ranging from oil paint to porcelain, these portraits illustrate the enduring popularity of portraits of women performers. Crucially the book seeks to reassess the traditional association between actress and'prostitute', and the moral ambiguity of women playing male roles. Portraiture became an important vehicle for the expression of concerns about female sexuality, social status,decorum, gender and celebrity. The authors also chart the commercialisation of the spectacle of the actress, as well as the connections between the eighteenth-century 'star system' and modern celebrity culture. Organised thematically, sections include: 'Painting Acresses' Lives', 'Nell Gwyn and Covent Garden Goddesses', 'Divas, Dancing and the Rage for Music: Painting Women in Musical Performance', 'Beauty, Ageing and the Body Politic of the Eighteenth-Century Actress' and 'Star Systems'. Illustrated with remarkable paintings by major artists of the period, a fascinating and lucid text reveals the many ways in which women performers enabled artistic innovation and creativity, provoked intellectual debate and contributed to the popularity and visibility of the theatre. Accompanies an exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, London, 20 October 2011 - 8 January 2012.

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