

Winning The Widow
An interlude in one act

Introduction

Winning The Widow (1856) is a light comedy with four equally showy parts for two women and two men. Lady Emily is played by the author, Lucy Newbery, formerly Miss Lucy Bennett, who brings her experience as a professional actress to the creation of this one act interlude, which is an adaptation or, as the front matter puts it, ‘an alternative’ to an earlier piece, *Personation*, a two-hander written and performed by Mrs Charles Kemble (better known as Maria Theresa De Camp), some forty years earlier. Newbery’s ‘homage’ to the former star of many comedies at the theatres Royal retains much of the original, especially in the highly comic caricatures of a French valet and an old French housekeeper who compete for laughs in an escalation of mangled *Franglais* which is virtually unaltered from the original. Newbery modernises the two central characters with the unmarried Lady Julia becoming the young widow, Lady Emily and Lord Henry demoted to the station of a dashing Captain in the army. The central plot also remains virtually the same and concerns the gentleman’s return from three year’s abroad and his decision to disguise himself as a French valet in order to test out the true nature and fidelity of the woman he loves. She, in turn, having found out his plan, disguises herself as the elderly be-whiskered housekeeper but, as one might expect, disguises are eventually thrown off and the lovers unite to enter into connubial bliss. Although Lucy Newbery retains much of the original play she reaches back still further into the business of earlier stock comedies by adding two new characters to *Winning The Widow*: Flora, the lady’s maid, and her beau, Peter, the gardener, with his much-repeated catchphrase, ‘I don’t like it, I don’t like it at all’. These two typical ‘servant characters’ mirror the main plot, adding a layer of coquetry, physical comedy and farce to the whole proceedings. Intertheatricality is clearly at work here, not only in Newbery’s importation of the De Camp piece but also in the place of performance, The Royal Soho Theatre in Dean Street, London, formerly the theatrical home to another actress/manager, Frances Maria Kelly, who is referred to in the central plotting of Newbery’s play. *Winning the Widow* is not a remarkable piece of dramatic writing in literary terms but in the context of its theatrical borrowings, alterations and references, it has much to offer to the re-reading of performance in nineteenth-century theatre.

Provenance and Perception, Alteration and Ownership

Mrs Charles Kemble (1777-1838), formerly and equally known as Maria Theresa De Camp, wrote several plays including *Personation* or; *Fairly Taken In*, ‘a comic interlude in one act’ in which she played Lady Julia, often with her husband, Charles Kemble, as Lord Henry. There are several published editions of the play produced between c1835 and 1879¹ which suggest it was a popular piece with professional and amateur companies alike. The DNB entry for De Camp suggests a performance date of June 9th, 1815 in which, as Lady Julia, De Camp made her

¹ I have consulted four editions held at the British Library across this date range. All but the Lacy’s acting edition of 1879 include additional ‘remarks, biographical and critical, by D.-G [George Daniel]’ and carry an engraving by Mr Bonner ‘from a drawing taken in the theatre by Mr. R. Cruikshank’.

last appearance before retiring from the stage² but *The Times* reviews a performance at Covent Garden on September 11th 1818, noting ‘this little drama has frequently been performed before, and once, we believe, in the course of the last season’.³ Allardyce Nicoll’s hand list of plays offers April 29th 1805 as the first performance given at Drury Lane.⁴ Lacy’s acting edition⁵ also notes the first performance date of April 29th 1805 but has the playwright/actress Miss De Camp playing Lady Julia opposite Mr Bannister as Lord Henry, rather than her husband, Charles Kemble. Genest concurs with this information, noting that it was Bannister’s benefit night with the actor appearing first in the main piece, *The Country Girl*,⁶ followed by the premiere of *Personation*. Genest notes that: ‘Personation is not printed – it pleases in representation, if well acted – but everything depends on the acting’.⁷ It seems that the piece pleased well enough for the Kemble double-act to perform it in several revivals at Covent Garden.⁸ The play appears again in a French’s acting edition with cast lists of performances in Britain and America.⁹ French’s edition credits Mr and Mrs Kemble with the ‘original’ performance, with Mr Abbott and Miss Foote reviving the piece at Covent Garden. Mr and Mrs Connor mirrored the husband/wife double act on New York’s Broadway stage in 1856, preceded by Mr Ternan and Miss Fanny Ternan performing the roles at Chestnut Street, Philadelphia in 1836. All the published editions identify themselves as ‘printed from the acting copy’ and most are prefaced by George Daniels ‘remarks’ which include a comment on the playwright:

² See Joseph Knight, ‘Kemble, Maria Theresa (1777–1838)’, rev. K. A. Crouch, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004

[<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/15323>, accessed 11 Oct 2007]

The DNB entry appears to be incorrect when compared with the detailed entry on Maria Theresa De Camp in *A Biographical Dictionary &c* which notes that the Kembles appeared together at Covent Garden on 12th December 1815 in another of De Camp’s plays, *Smiles and Tears* in which De Camp played Lady Emily (the name given to the central character in Newbery’s play) but that she was absent from the London stage for the next two seasons, returning to Covent Garden for a final season in 1818-19. see Highfill, Philip, H., (ed.), *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & other Stage Personnel in London 1660-1800* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973, 16 Vols., Kemble, Mrs Charles 321-329.

³ *The Times*, September 12th, 1818. All references to reviews and advertisements carried in *The Times* have been gathered from *The Times* digital archive 1785-1985, Thomson & Gale databases at: <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark>

⁴ Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of Early Nineteenth Century Drama 1800-1850* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930, 2 vols, vol 2, 325. Adrienne Scullion places the premiere on the same day and month but two years earlier in 1803. See her article ‘Politesse and the Woman at Risk: The Social Comedies of Marie-Thérèse De Camp’, *Comparative Drama. Kalamazoo* Summer 2004, Vol.38, Iss. 2/3; 235-259.

⁵ *Lacy’s Acting Edition of Plays* vol.89, no.1327 [1879] identifies the playwright as Maria Theresa De Camp and offers the additional information that the play was ‘adapted from the French’, a suggestion that does not appear in any of the earlier publications of the play but one which Scullion agrees with, further noting that the play was first published by Dicks in 1805, followed by the Lacy addition. (see note above for Scullion reference).

⁶ Garrick’s adaptation of the much bawdier Restoration play *The Country Wife* by William Wycherley (1672).

⁷ John Genest, *The English Stage 1660-1830* London: 1832, 10 vols., vol.VII, 650. There is an interesting question of interpretation here as Genest may well be referring to the need for *all* plays to be well acted or, indeed, may be restricting his comment to *Personation* which was, undoubtedly, written as a vehicle for two strong performers.

⁸ When included in *Cumberland’s British Theatre*, vol.32, Covent Garden is cited as the only place of performance.

⁹ *The Minor Drama* no.120, New York, Samuel French, 1860.

The name of Kemble bears a charm, and all that is associated with it claims our acceptance and favour. The present interlude exhibited the talents of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Kemble in an amusing light, and is not unworthy of the literary fame of that accomplished lady.

Daniel goes on to provide a witty plot summary, concluding with the observation that ‘the language is sprightly and full of point’. Bonner’s engraving from Cruikshank’s illustration depicts the two characters of Lady Julia and Sir Henry framed by large French-windows upstage centre, and a view to the garden beyond with the ‘wild wood’ (referred to in *Personation* but altered to the ‘little wilderness’ in *Winning the Widow*) visible as a backdrop. The action captures a high point in the play as Lord Henry attempts to recover the marriage contract clasped firmly in the hand of the old French housekeeper who holds it aloft. The caption reads: ‘Thou infernal old hag! Return that fatal instrument immediately, or –’. This moment precedes the dénouement as Lady Julia peels off her disguise to reveal her real identity and her true feelings, to her betrothed.

De Camp evidently created a role for herself in which she might exploit her undoubted talents to the full. *The Times* review of her performance on September 11th, 1818 notes that:

Mrs. C. Kemble performed the part of Lady Julia in a style that assured us that she has lost none of her powers; and when we recall the versatility of her talent, we speculate on much future pleasure arising out of her return to the stage; her voice, too, if we may judge from a few occasional notes sung sportively appears to be in excellent preservation. Her reception was extremely flattering.¹⁰

Mrs Newbery is unlikely to have seen De Camp’s performance but the published play was available and it is clear that her ‘alteration’ to *Personation* retained all the showy elements of the aristocratic leading character. It is certainly Lady Julia/Lady Emily who drives the action and an advertisement in *The Times* for January 19th 1857 shows that Mrs Newbery made the most of her dual role as playwright/actress in a performance at the Theatre Royal, Cheltenham, Old Wells.

Mrs Newbery (late Miss Lucy Bennett), of the Theatres Royal is re-engaged at the above theatre in consequence of her success in the *Widow Green*, *Lady Duberly*, *Mrs Chillington*, &c., and will appear on January 21 as Mrs. Hector Sternhold in *STILL WATERS RUN DEEP*, and Lady Emily Wilmot in her own farce of *WINNING THE WIDOW*.

This revival of her performance as Lady Emily followed the play’s first production in London some eight months earlier and while it was not given its first outing in one of the Theatres Royal, it did appear at London’s Royalty Theatre or; the Soho Theatre, as it was now known, in the Spring of 1856.¹¹

¹⁰ *The Times*, September 12th 1818, reviews.

¹¹ Allardyce Nicoll’s hand list of plays dates the first performance as April 28 1856. See *A History of English Drama 1660-1900* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945, 769. There is a problem here as the licensor’s copy is dated as 2nd/3rd May of the same year. The anomaly may

The Place of Performance

The Soho theatre first opened on 25th May, 1840 under the management of Miss Frances Maria Kelly who built the theatre as part of her own private residence at 73, Dean St. The story of Kelly's extraordinary reign as London actress, theatre manager and then Director of the first recognised Dramatic Academy can be found elsewhere¹² but her name is inextricably linked to this theatre, as the reference to her in *Winning The Widow* makes plain. After a series of difficulties, Kelly left Dean St. in January 1849 and, according to one biographer, Basil Francis, at this point the theatre was stripped of all its interior fittings but it was soon returned to its working state as a theatre for visiting professional companies and amateur companies. Having cast off its name as 'Miss Kelly's Theatre', it was variously known as The Royalty, The New English Opera House, New Italian Opera (Royalty Soho Theatre) and then again, simply The Soho. *The Times* carries advertisements for the theatre from June 1853 and on July 18th 1854 there are two advertisements. The first invites audiences to attend a performance of *Hamlet*, a benefit for widows and orphans of men serving overseas,¹³ while the second, appearing directly below, reads as follows:

The Stage – Royal Soho Theatre, Dean-street, Oxford Street – Lessee Mr. Mowbray. – This elegant THEATRE will contain 800 persons, and is to be LET nightly for Dramatic Performances, Concerts, Lectures &c. Ladies and Gentlemen desirous of making the stage their profession will here find every facility for acquiring the necessary qualifications – in short, this establishment supplies a long looked for desideratum, and is the only recognized Dramatic School in the metropolis.

Thomas Mowbray, the lessee, appears to have continued in the spirit of 'Miss Kelly's Theatre' – or, perhaps, has appropriated it – as a place for professional and amateur performance and actor-training. One amateur company seems to have rented the theatre over several years and it is as a performer with the St James Dramatic Society that the name of the playwright, Mrs Newbery, first appears.

The Times, April 14th 1852 carries an advertisement for the 'Royal Soho Theatre (Late Miss Kelly's)' and 'the last performance this season of the St James Dramatic Society' who were performing two stock pieces from the previous century: Centlivre's *The Wonder* and Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*. Interestingly, only five names, all female, are included in the advert with the last being that of

simply be an error as the month and day almost exactly coincide with the first performance of *Personation*. Perhaps, as the play was 'an alteration' of an established piece and was to be performed by an amateur company, the licensing requirement was an afterthought. This is a purely speculative interpretation and with no extant bill to verify the dates, it is more than likely that the Nicoll entry is erroneous.

¹² See Basil Francis, *Fanny Kelly of Drury Lane* London: Rockliff Publishing, 1950. Also Gilli Bush-Bailey, *Performing HerSelf: Fanny Kelly's Dramatic Recollections*, forthcoming Manchester University Press.

¹³ The Crimean War (1853-1856) resulted in many benefit performances by amateur companies. On December 9th 1854 *The Times* publishes the accounts for The Royal Commission of the Patriotic fund for the relief of widows and orphans of men on active service in the 'present war', listing receipts including 'Arpedeckne, A. Esq the entire receipts of a performance at the Royal Soho Theatre £70 4s'.

Mrs Newbery. She appears again with the St James Dramatic Society in a bill for Wednesday, April 19th 1854. Lucy Newbery performs in the last two pieces on this evening: a compressed version of Morton's *Speed the Plough* and then in an extract (the second act only) of Sheridan's *The Critic*. The bill announces that this is the 'sixth and last performance' of the season and that box office receipts are in 'aid of the funds of the society'. The evening's entertainments begin at 7pm and 'are so arranged to terminate at eleven o' clock'. There is a range of prices: Private Boxes are a guinea (£1.1s), Stalls 3s, Dress Circle 2s 6d (half a crown), Pit and upper boxes 1s 6d with half price paid by audiences arriving after nine o'clock. It seems likely that *Winning the Widow* was a part of a similar bill in 1856, playing as either an Interlude between two stock plays or as the final piece of the evening. It was clearly enough of a success for its author and leading actress to offer it for professional performance in a season at the Theatre Royal, Cheltenham in the following January (see above).

The Place of Professional Experience

Lucy Newbery (née Bennett), Fanny Kelly and Maria Theresa De Camp were all professional actresses who moved beyond the confines of that single professional identity. I have found little extant evidence for Newbery's acting career beyond an advertisement in *The Times* for the Theatre Royal Haymarket's production of *The Provoked Husband* on January 11th 1842, some fourteen years before *Winning the Widow*. If indeed it is the same Miss Lucy Bennett, the advert announces that she 'is from the Theatre Royal Birmingham, her first appearance in London' and that she is playing Lady Townley, a not inconsiderable part for an actress new to the London stage. There are, however, no further signs of reviews or bill announcements for Lucy Bennett/Mrs Newbery, other than those already mentioned above.¹⁴ It would not be unusual to find that the young actress left the stage soon after marrying Mr Newbery but there has, to my knowledge, been little research on the extent to which married women were able to maintain links with the profession unless, as in the case of Maria Theresa De Camp, you married into a theatrical family such as the Kembles. Lucy Newbery's appearances with the St James Dramatic Society suggests that her public performances were, perhaps, more acceptable (and accepted) in the amateur company system. But then she does return to the professional stage under her married name in January 1857, which makes such an assumption questionable. What is clear is that while Lucy Bennett/Newbery was not an actress of sufficient interest to warrant much attention from the nineteenth-century theatre reviewer or commentator, she aligns herself with two earlier actresses of some considerable note via her one act play.

Newbery's adaptation, and modernisation, of De Camp's play demonstrates her ability to neatly sew in features of stock comedy (mainly around her creation of Flora and Peter) while retaining the flavour of the smart fashionable comedy. Her interest in De Camp's work as both playwright and actress is most clear in the almost entirely unaltered section in which Lady Emily adopts the disguise of the French Housekeeper. The French as butt of the English joke has a long-standing place in British comedy and De Camp made the most of her own French origins in creating her rather grotesque caricature which is, after all, a 'clever' disguise. What

¹⁴ It will be clear to the reader that I have relied heavily on *The Times* and the extant bills for the Royalty / Soho Theatre. There are numerous periodicals for the period, many of which carry theatrical comment and reviews that might illuminate this subject still further.

is more surprising is Newbery's decision to take this a step further by introducing a second French caricature in Lady Emily's recreation of a scene she identifies as belonging to 'Miss Kelly' and which made such an impression upon her when first seen performed at Miss Kelly's theatre (see n17 in annotated text of *Winning The Widow*). Kelly's *Dramatic Recollections* has numerous character sketches from which to choose, most of them offering the actress an opportunity to show her comic versatility. Perhaps Newbery was playing safe by offering her audience more of the same? The additional twist here is the intertheatrical link she makes by placing herself at the centre of a piece that identifies De Camp and Covent Garden on one hand and Fanny Kelly and her theatre on the other. The delightfully gauche reference to Shakespeare and his Lady 'Mad Bess' would not have been lost on a nineteenth-century audience. Lucy Bennett/Newbery picks up the strands of theatre practice and presence established by other women in theatre and demonstrates in her *Winning the Widow* the ability to embrace the conventions of the stage, the expectation of her audience and provide herself with a range of acting possibilities as the honourable Lady Emily, the old French Housekeeper and the sprightly French Governess. Such versatility is more familiar to us today in the work of writer/performers such as French & Saunders or Catherine Tate but here, in 1856, their progenitors can be seen in sketches written and performed as One Act Interludes on the stages of Covent Garden and The Soho.

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