

*Abstract*

Laura Mariani, *L'Ottocento delle attrici*

Drawing on Meldolesi's definition of the 19th century as 'the period of theatrical inventions', the paper sheds new light on the under-researched innovative contribution of theatre actresses. Through the accurate description of four major actresses – Carlotta Marchionni, Adelaide Ristori, Giacinta Pezzana, Eleonora Duse – its aim is to highlight 'objective' elements of diversity compared with male actors and their related languages. In a period in which theatre companies open their doors, a sensible disproportion between men and women is encountered, with the latter facing greater difficulty in pursuing a career in the theatre. Thus, actresses by legacy are extremely precious, because they contribute to the development of a career continuity. In addition, while male actors are recognised as citizens, actresses are destined to face more difficulties due to their role as women and public figures. Therefore, they ought to build reassuring *personae* contrasting the shadows created by the performance and the interpreted characters. While this situation often causes tensions and escapes from theatres, it also encourages actresses to work on 'negative' characters and focus on their complexity through the inclusion of elements of 'below-acting' and 'anti-acting'. Also in cases of disguise, actresses are encouraged to 'take off' while actors to 'put on', since femininity is considered as a mask as well as an essence. This art of details complicates and intensifies the feminine allurements practised on the scene by making their face the mirror of the soul and using their bodies as the instrument of seduction. In this period, despite their questionable honour, actresses acquire a renowned status in society. Women aiming to achieve social visibility due to the expansion of the job market and the access to new professions are inspired by actresses in the shaping of their *persona* and, by becoming spectators, they start to affect theatre activities. Even if it is conceptualised with a great delay, the female audience is established in this period.