TOWARDS A NEW METHODOLOGY FOR WORKING WITH HISTORIC THEATRE COSTUME: A BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH FOCUSSING ON ELLEN TERRY'S (1847-1928) 'BEETLEWING DRESS'

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Abstract

Direct engagement with the material culture of historic theatre costume, particularly surviving costumes, has the potential to make a significant contribution to the existing discourse surrounding costume and performance. The comparative absence of the surviving costumes from such discussions, stems in part from the fact that the value of this source material has yet to be fully recognised, researched and theorised. Responding directly to that challenge, this article unites approaches from dress history, theatre history and material culture, to offer a specific methodology for the investigation and analysis of theatre costume, which is founded upon the examination and assessment of such garments.

Nineteenth actress Ellen Terry (1847-1928) will be used as a case study through which to present this new methodology. Most famous for the twenty-two years she spent as the leading lady of the Lyceum Theatre, this discussion will focus on one of Terry's more celebrated Shakespearean roles; Lady Macbeth. It will explore the design, creation and afterlife of costumes worn by Terry in the 1888 Lyceum production of

Macbeth, and consider the crucial part they played, not simply in the original staging, but also in shaping the legacy of both performance, and performer.

The close analysis of this key example from Terry's theatrical wardrobe will establish the factors fundamental to the interpretation of such garments and demonstrate the evidence offered from material culture sources, most importantly, surviving costumes. Through this discussion, the article will offer a new methodology for the analysis of historic theatre costume, which can be employed in the study of other figures, theatres and periods; opening up a new and productive direction for future research.

Key words: Ellen Terry, Theatre Costume, Material Culture, Meaning, Identity, Biography.

Introduction

[INSERT - Figure 1]

Recently the focus of a £110,000 conservation project and the focal point of a new display at Ellen Terry's former home, Smallhythe Place (Kennedy, 2011), 'The Beetlewing Dress,' first worn by the actress as Lady Macbeth in 1888, is arguably the most famous of Terry's surviving costumes. Both her performance, and this costume, were immortalised in a dramatic portrait by John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), originally exhibited at the New Gallery in 1888-9, and now held by Tate Britain. **[Figure 1]**. As Terry's costume designer, Alice Comyns-Carr (1850-1927) recalled, Sargent was amongst the spectators present at the opening night of the production. She claimed that it was upon witnessing Terry's striking entrance (wearing the Beetlewing Dress), together with the moment in the next scene (when the actress re-appeared in a heather velvet cloak embroidered with fiery griffins and swept out of the castle keep to greet the old King), that Sargent first conceived the original idea for the portrait

(Comyns-Carr, 1926:299-300). As Terry observed in a letter to her daughter, the portrait captured elements of the costume missing from the photographs which, she felt, '[gave] no idea of it at all, for it is in colour that it is so splendid.' Most importantly, the finished portrait suggested 'all that [she] should like to have conveyed in [her] performance of Lady Macbeth' (Terry, 1908: 293-4).

Although the scene depicted in the painting never featured in the original production, it was Sargent's triumphant pose which the exhibition curators chose to replicate in the new display (Chamot, 1964: 589-90). Enmeshed within a narrative already complicated by this curatorial intervention, the conservation work carried out on this famous 'Beetlewing Dress' raised further questions regarding the 'true history' of this costume; not least, the significant fact that this 'original' costume, was actually constructed from a composite of at least two garments. It was this close engagement with the surviving costume which first prompted my consideration of the complex 'afterlives' of theatre costumes and the need for a methodological and theoretical framework through which to document and articulate this multi-layered narrative. The detailed analysis of this specific costume will therefore be used to establish the factors which are fundamental to the wider interpretation and study of historical theatrical costume. These include: the significance of social, artistic and historic context; parallels and contrasts between on and off-stage dress; the collaborative process of design and making; the function of costume as both performance object and expression of 'identity'; the issue of multiple and complex 'biographies' and the crucial evidence offered from material culture sources, most importantly, surviving costumes (where they exist).

This discussion, which will be supported through reference to other relevant costumes from Terry's theatrical wardrobe, and contextualised through reference to related

sources, will then lead into the presentation of a new methodology for researchers working with theatre costume. Founded upon an object-based material culture approach to analysis, this methodology will bring to light the valuable visual and physical evidence about performance and design that can be gathered from surviving costumes. Igor Kopytoff's (2006) concept of 'biographies' accumulated by objects offers a route through which to analyse and articulate the complex 'biographies' historic theatre costume gather. Drawing upon the work of Joseph Roach (1996), Barbara Hodgdon (2006) and Marvin Carlson (2002), this article will also draw attention to the ability these garments have to carry the 'memories,' or 'ghosts,' of their previous wearer(s), acting as 'surrogates' for the bodies which once inhabited them.

Costume and Wearer: 'Our Lady of the Lyceum'

One of the most popular and celebrated actresses of her generation, Terry was immersed in the world of the theatre from birth. The daughter of two 'strolling players,' Benjamin (1818–96) and Sarah (1819–92) Terry and four of her eight surviving siblings also became actors. She made her stage debut in 1856 at the Princess Theatre, London, performing the role of Mamillius in *The Winter's Tale* alongside Charles Kean (1811-1868) as Leontes. The peak of her theatrical career is arguably the twenty-two years, between 1878 and 1902, which she spent as leading lady of the Lyceum Company. During this time, Terry appeared in a wide range of productions, but became predominantly known for her performances in Shakespeare, specifically: Ophelia in *Hamlet* (1878); Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* (1879); Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* (1882), and, the role upon which this article will focus particularly, Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* (1889).

The partnership Terry established with the actor and manager of the Lyceum Company, Sir Henry Irving (1838-1905), was founded upon a mutually beneficial compromise, rather than inequality or competition, and it is evident that Irving appreciated the value of Terry's practical and artistic experience (Terry, 1908: 155). This professional relationship, together with her status as a celebrated high earning actress, placed Terry in an unusually privileged position and enabled her to gain a significant, and unusual, degree of control over the design and creation of her costumes (Powell, 1997:7). From the beginning of her career at the Lyceum, Terry had her own costume designer, and, over the years, she was able to play an increasingly influential role in the design process. Whilst star performers, such as Terry, might have the opportunity to work with their own costumier to create and control their own garments other members of the company, such as those working at the Lyceum Theatre, where there was an 'in-house' wardrobe, would have had costumes provided for them (Kaplan and Stowell, 1994:3-4, 64-65) (Breward, 2010: 153-6). Most actors in this period, particularly those in Stock Companies or those travelling in pursuit of engagements, seem to have built up their own stock of theatrical costume as they were frequently required to provide their own garments for performance. (Cumming, 2004: 118) (De Marly, 1982: 2). Terry, by contrast, had her costumes made to measure, and, at the peak of her career, could afford to commission new garments and to pay for older costumes to be replaced (Terry to Nettleship, c. 1899) (Terry to Nettleship, 3 June, 1901).

Costume and Character: A 'womanly' Lady Macbeth

Terry's lifestyle, both on and off the stage, directly challenged conventional Victorian morality and social codes. She was married and divorced three times, had two

illegitimate children (whose existence she never sought to conceal), and participated in at least two affairs, including a secret, and long-term, relationship with her stage partner, Irving (Duncan, 2016: 154-155). Sos Eltis contends that, in spite of the controversial nature of her private life, Terry's celebrity was founded, at least in part, on her position as '[...] an icon of traditional feminine tenderness and virtue' (Eltis, 2007:179). The restrictions this characterisation placed on Terry become apparent in the controversy provoked by the announcement, in 1888, that she was to play Lady Macbeth. Many critics declared that Terry was 'too good, too gentle, too feminine for the part' citing the '[…] old stage idea was that a big woman, with harsh features and a strident voice could best express the terrible creature who urged on her hesitating lord.' (n.a., December 1888) (n.a. 1888:10-11). Indeed, one critic suggested that

> […] there is a gentle womanliness about Miss Terry which makes it
> impossible to for her to utter convincingly such a speech as that
> hideous invocation to "thick night" and the Spirits of Evil. To read this
> and suppose that Lady Macbeth was other than diabolical and fiendish
> is impossible; and these are qualities to represent which is beyond the
> wide scope of Miss Terry's genius, great as it unquestionably is (na.,
> 1888: n.p.).

Such criticism exemplifies the extent to which, as Kerry Powell suggests, Terry struggled to escape the rhetoric which controlled her performance and compelled her to supply '[…] a masculinist public with what it demanded – a representation of itself, its prejudices and ideals.' Powell contends that, as a result, even Terry's '[…] enactment of Lady Macbeth was trimmed to the proportions of a Victorian Dame' (Powell, 1997:54). There is evidence, however, to suggest that Terry sought to resist and challenge this perception of her performance.

As an experienced actress, Terry would have been conscious of the long production history of this play, not least the enduring legacy of Sarah Siddon's (1775-1831) performance, which was popularly felt to have provided the definitive interpretation of the part (Shaughnessy, 2004: n.p.). More recent productions are also likely to have shaped Terry's interpretation, not least those of her contemporary, Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923), for whom the '[...] part became a seminal one.' (Marshall, 2007: 64). Indeed, as Gail Marshall stresses, whilst Terry's 1888 performance is '[…] usually read in relation to Siddons' innovations in the part,' it is equally likely that Terry was also '[…] responding to recent European and American performances' (64).

Critics certainly drew comparisons between Terry and Bernhardt's Lady Macbeth, identifying an important distinction between

> [...] the sensuality of the French Lady Macbeth seeking to work upon
> her lord's nature by means of animal passion and the sweet winning
> womanliness of the character as now presented at the Lyceum (n.a.,
> 29 December 1888: n.p.).

Despite the criticism which her 'feminine' interpretation of the role attracted, Terry's personal papers (specifically annotations in her personal copy of *Macbeth*)*,* together with her published writings, testify to her conviction that Lady Macbeth was 'A woman (all over a woman)' who 'was *not* a fiend, and *did* love her husband.' (Terry, handwritten annotation in her copy of *Macbeth,* National Trust Inventory Number E.V.2.18). Terry's determination to persist with her personal understanding of the character is manifest in a letter she sent to her daughter in 1888 in which she resolves: 'not [to] budge an inch in the reading of it, for that I know is right.' She was therefore prepared to 'what is vulgarly called "sweat at it," each night,' in order to counter any

critics who claimed she wanted to 'make [Lady Macbeth] a "gentle, lovable woman"', for, 'She was nothing of the sort' (Terry, 1908:307).

Examined in the light of the theatrical traditions and social preconceptions that shaped her performance, Terry's 'Lady Macbeth' represented a carefully judged compromise between her personal interpretation of the character, and the expectations of her audience. Recognising the limitations imposed by her reputation for 'femininity' and 'charm,' she was obliged to present a Lady Macbeth that would maintain this established 'public identity,' and yet fulfil her ambition to play an assertive and commanding figure. Her portrayal of Lady Macbeth as a woman whose actions were motivated by passionate love for her husband, enabled Terry to emphasise the feminine qualities within the character, and thereby sustain her reputation for 'womanliness.' This interpretation enabled Terry to create a 'new Lady Macbeth,' whose 'femininity,' though associated with weakness and 'fragility,' represented a source of strength, and the means though which she was able to manipulate her male counterparts, and satisfy her craving for absolute power. As one critic concluded:

> Is this Lady Macbeth? Who shall decide? That it is not the Lady Macbeth of Mrs. Siddons we know. It is scarcely a Lady Macbeth we realise. It is perhaps, one of which we have dreamed. […] This is Miss Terry's Lady Macbeth (n.a. 31 December 1888: n.p.).

Design and Creation

Throughout her career, Terry was a strong advocate of 'harmonious costumes,' believing that they could and ought to 'help and inspire the actor' and was closely involved in designing many of her costumes (Terry, 1908: 10). Her entry into the theatre coincided with significant shifts in attitudes towards design and costume. Far

more importance began to be attached to historical authenticity and the creation of costumes which were deemed 'archaeologically correct and artistically appropriate' (Wilde, 1891: n.p.). Irving was amongst the actor/managers who adopted this new approach to costume and set design, investing heavily in both and establishing the Lyceum Theatre as a 'Temple of Art' (Meisel, 1983: 402-342). Terry's privileged status as the Lyceum Company's leading lady therefore allowed her to create costumes that not only achieved the 'aesthetic harmony' between set and costume so highly valued by the Aesthetic movement and by her, but which also fulfilled their dramatic purpose, reinforcing and expressing the characters being represented (Terry, 1908: 10, 69).[1]

[INSERT - Figure 2]

Whether in a conscious anticipation of the controversy her performance was likely to provoke, or in pursuit of a specific artistic effect, Terry's costumes played an important part in reinforcing her portrayal of Lady Macbeth as a powerful, but feminine, woman, and provided an immediate statement of her new reading of the character. This effect is particularly evident in the dress Terry wore for her first appearance on stage **[Figure 2]**. As Terry's costume designer, Comyns-Carr, related, her aim had been to create a dress as 'like soft chain armour as [she] could, and yet have something that would give the appearance of the scales of a serpent' (Comyns-Carr, 1925: 211-212). This costume was deliberately designed to reproduce the effect of 'chain mail,' an impression heightened by the serpentine gleam of the blue green beetle wing cases which covered the crocheted surface. The design proved extremely successful, providing Terry with a form of 'armour' which conveyed her character's majesty and power, and yet retained sufficient signs of femininity and beauty to placate even the harshest of critics. A warrior queen to match a warrior king.

Another striking aspect of Comyns-Carr's designs was the contrast between the lavishness of Terry's garments and the simpler, more subdued, tones of the costumes of other performers, Irving included. This discrepancy did not pass unremarked, and was made apparent in Wilde's pointed observation that whilst 'Lady Macbeth seems to be an economical housekeeper and evidently patronises local industries for her husband's clothes and servant's liveries,' '[…] she takes care to do all her own shopping in Byzantium' (Wilde quoted in Robertson, 1931:151). The same contrast is evident in sketches and photographs of Irving and Terry as they appeared in the play. The fact that costumes worn by Irving in the role of Macbeth also survive, makes it possible to compare the actual garments worn by the two performers. As the contrasting costumes reveal, whilst both Terry and Irving's garments were shaped by historical research, Irving's garments were designed to harmonise with the set, whereas Terry's costumes, in particular the 'Beetlewing Dress,' deliberately set her apart. The bright colours and the glistening embellishments chosen for Terry's garments drew immediate attention to her presence on the stage and provided a feminised armour which established the dominant status of this 'womanly,' but magnificent, Lady Macbeth.

[INSERT – Figure 3]

The majority of Irving costumes are simple knee-length asymmetrical tunics, cut in a wrap-over style worn with semi-circular wool cloaks.[2] Most are drawn from an earthy colour palette of deep purples and browns, the one exception being the robes worn by Irving in the banquet scene. Reflecting Macbeth's new status as monarch, these robes were designed to mirror the cream and gold tones of Terry's costume for this scene and consisted of an under-doublet formed from cloth-of-gold style silk brocade, trimmed with gold braid and imitation 'ruby' glass jewels set on a burgundy ground

[Figure 3].[3] Though his costumes in this production remained comparatively plain, Irving was conscious of the importance of spectacle and the dramatic effect of colour on the stage. Witnessing the effect of a vivid blood red' cloak Comyns-Carr had designed for Terry at a dress rehearsal, the actor/manager had remarked upon the 'wonderful splash of colour' but, 'when the first night came it was he [Irving] who was wrapped in that scarlet cloak, whilst Nell wore the less striking […] heather coloured wrap which I had hurriedly designed at the last moment' (Comyns-Carr, 1926: 213).

Neither Terry nor Comyns-Carr discuss the contrast between Terry's costumes and those worn by the rest of the cast. One explanation could lie however, in the public interest attached to Terry's performance as Lady Macbeth. Audiences had already seen and formed their judgement of Irving's characterisation of Macbeth when he first performed the part in 1875. For Terry however, this production marked her debut in the role of Lady Macbeth. Surviving reviews, whether criticising or praising her interpretation, attest to the impact of the theatrical event and the important role Terry's costumes played in heightening the effect of her performance. As a writer in the *Morning Post* observed:

> […] difficult to deal with is the Lady Macbeth of Miss Ellen Terry. That it
> is convincing few will maintain. It is, however, divinely beautiful. The
> woman who, in a quaint and indescribably beautiful costume, read by
> the light of the fire the letter of her husband […] might have stood in the
> Court at Camelot, and gained the wondering homage and obeisance of
> Sir Galahad, as well as Sir Lancelot […] (n.a., *Morning Post,* 31
> December 1888: n.p.).

Invisible Hands: Designers and Makers

One of the principal challenges faced in any investigation of a historic theatre costume, is discovering which figures had primary influence over its design and creation. Dialogues between designers, makers, wearers, and, indeed, directors (or their historical equivalents), are rarely documented, with the result that the careers and lives of costume makers represent a notable absence from existing research within theatre history. In Terry's case, however, there is an unusually rich range of surviving evidence testifying to her participation in the design of her costumes, and documenting her collaboration with the individuals who designed and made these garments. She worked with several costume designers over the course of her career, including her lover, Godwin, and her daughter, the director and costumier, Edith Craig (1869-1947). During her time as part of the Lyceum Company however, two women played a particularly important part in forming Terry's stage wardrobe; Alice Comyns-Carr (1850-1927) and Ada Nettleship (1856-1932).

Alice Comyns-Carr (1850-1927)

Comyns-Carr's involvement in Terry's stage wardrobe can be traced back to 1882, but their collaboration was made official in 1887 when she was appointed as Terry's lead costume designer (Comyns-Carr, 1926: 79). The pair had a long and successful partnership which endured until the late 1890s. Both published autobiographies and these texts provide key insights into the nature of their professional partnership. They were both committed to similar artistic ideals and were prominent figures in the Aesthetic movement. Compromises were still required however, and whilst Terry complained of 'the weight' of many of her more extravagant costumes (including those worn in *Macbeth*), Comyns-Carr remarked upon the challenge of designing for an actress who, though possessing 'a fine sense' of historical dress, would 'jib at fashions

that she fancied might interfere with her movement while acting' (Terry, 1908: 350) (Comyns-Carr, 1926: 215-6).

Ada Nettleship (1856-1932)

It was through Comyns-Carr that Terry was introduced to Ada Nettleship. Nettleship, who had trained as an 'art embroiderer' and was beginning to establish a career as a private dressmaker became Terry's primary costume maker from the late 1880s onwards. She also made numerous items for the actress's personal wardrobe (n.a., 1897:16). It is rarely possible to be able to learn much about the individuals involved in the creation of historic theatre costumes, but, in this instance, several letters sent from Terry to Nettleship have survived. This correspondence reveals the implicit trust Terry placed in Nettleship's ability to interpret her instructions accurately and to respond to last-minute requests for replacement costumes (Terry to Nettleship, 1895). Terry is also very frank about her changing figure, and the need to adapt costumes, and her personal dress accordingly (Terry to Nettleship, February 1895) (Terry to Nettleship, July 1895).

Macbeth, 1888

There is an unusually rich range of surviving evidence testifying to Terry's participation in the design of her for the 1888 production of Macbeth.[4] Examining texts from Terry's library, for instance, Emma Slocombe discovered extensive annotation within the actress's personal copy of Planché's *History of British Costume* (1847 edition), which included distinct 'crosses' next to two engravings of costumes from the early medieval period (c.1100–1300); dates which directly corresponded with the eleventh century setting chosen for the Lyceum production. Slocombe also identified parallels between the style of Terry's costumes and an engraving taken from a brass of Clothilde, Queen

of the Franks, in the Notre Dame Cathedral (attributed to the architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc) (Slocombe, 2011: 10)**.** She notes that Comyns-Carr acknowledged that she had actually 'cut out the patterns [for the dress] from the diagrams in the wonderful costume book of Viollet le Duc' and then crocheted a fine yarn formed from **'**a twist of soft green silk and blue tinsel,' sourced from Bohemia by Nettleship, 'to match them' (Comyns-Carr, 1925: 211-212).

Despite the eerie glow offered by the crocheted blue tinsel strands running through the costume, Comyns-Carr had been concerned that the dress might not be 'brilliant enough' (Comyns-Carr, 1926:211-212). Cumming, who has also examined the costumes in the Lyceum production of *Macbeth,* suggested that it was at this point that contemporary fashions, specifically the use of beetle-wing cases to embellish garments, provided crucial ideas for the design. As Cummings notes, it was the dramatic effect of a dress worn by Lady Randolph Churchill, 'trimmed all over with green beetle's wings,' which inspired Comyns-Carr to sew the same beetle wings over the surface of Terry's costume (Cumming, 1978:58). This, together with the further addition of 'a narrow border in Celtic designs, worked out in rubies and diamonds' at the hem and sleeve cuffs completed the costume, now known as 'The Beetlewing Dress' (Terry, 1908: 353) (Comyns-Carr, 1926: 211-212).

[INSERT – Figure 4]

Multiple Wearers and 'Performances'

An additional challenge faced when analysing surviving costumes lies in the fact that not only were costumes seldom reserved for a single scene within a production, they also frequently reappeared in other works within a performer's or company's repertoire. In the case of Terry's costumes, further complications arise in the process

of identification as several productions in which she appeared were repeatedly revived, both in London and on tours, and remained in the Lyceum Company repertoire for decades. As has been discussed, correspondence between Terry and her costume maker, Nettleship, alongside evidence gathered from the costumes themselves, reveals that the costumes Terry wore in long running productions were often altered in response to damage or re-made altogether to reflect a new aesthetic and to suit Terry's changing body.

Macbeth remained in the repertoire of the Lyceum Company long after the first production in 1888. It was performed in London, on tour, and Terry also wore many of her costumes when called upon to re-enact scenes from the play in a variety of contexts through until the early 1920s (Terry, 1911:89). After Terry had ceased to use the costume herself, there is evidence that it was loaned performers such as Sybil Thorndike (1882-1976), and, reportedly, in some of the costume pageants organised by Terry's daughter, Edith Craig (Mayor, 2016) (Tinker, 2010). An additional 'performance' was added to the history of Terry's costumes when they were loaned for exhibition in public display, outside Smallhythe Place. Photographs and clippings within the collection at Smallhythe record their presence as part of the display created for the British Theatrical Loan Exhibition, Dudley House, Park Lane, 1933. Whilst the 'Beetlewing Dress' did not feature in this 1933 exhibition, the fact that other costumes from the collection did, raises the possibility that the 'Beetlewing Dress' may also have been on display outside Smallhythe Place.

When the National Trust acquired the property and the collection in 1939, the costume became part of the Ellen Terry Collection (Melville, 2006:18-19). Unfortunately no photographs have survived to record the manner in which the costumes were displayed before the 1980s. Anecdotal evidence suggests that they may have been

draped around the house and stored on rails and Melville credits Craig (who remained custodian of the property until 1947) with 'arranging the Costume Room' (Gibbons, 2015) (Melville, 2006:18). By the 1980s the 'Beetlewing Dress' formed a central part in the display presented within the 'Costume Room' was left on display for an extended period. There were also occasions when the dress returned to its original function as a costume, including the time when Olive Chaplin (née Terry) (1885-1969), who served as curator of the Ellen Terry Museum from 1949, was photographed for publicity purposes wearing the dress at a jumble sale organised to raise funds for the collection in 1931.

During 2009 and 2010 extensive conservation work was undertaken on the 'Beetlewing Dress.' This conservation treatment revealed that the surviving dress is actually one of a number of different incarnations of the original costume. Two separate bodices survive, the sleeves, which were discovered to be separate from these bodices (with no evidence regarding how they were originally attached, if at all), had been altered, as had the length of the skirt. The complex process of conservation carried out by conservator Zenzie Tinker and her colleagues therefore entailed a carefully researched recreation, and reassembly, of the 'original costume'(Tinker, 2009: n.p.) (Tinker, 2010) (Tinker, 2011).

The 'Costume Room' in which the dress had previously been displayed was also re-designed and the conserved dress is now on semi-permanent display in this space. As noted at the beginning of this essay, the dress has been mounted on a mannequin which re-creates the pose depicted in the Singer-Sargent portrait and as such the display not only references the part that this painting has played in securing the enduring power and fame of this costume, but also reproduces a pose and imagined scene which were never part of the original performance.

A 'biographical' approach to analysis

As the complex backstory of 'The Beetlewing Dress' has made apparent, theatrical costumes have the ability to accumulate multiple and complex 'identities,' and a layered, rather than single, history. A methodology is therefore required through which to address the multiple narratives present within historic stage costume. With this aim in view, this next section will introduce methodological and theoretical approaches through which it becomes possible to interpret and articulate the complex 'biographies' of garments whose life cycle commonly includes re-use, re-fashioning, and re-definition, both on, and off, the stage.

A biographical approach to analysis, founded upon Igor Kopytoff's concept of 'object biographies', offers one route through which to pinpoint the key stages in the evolving biography of a stage costume and enables researchers to interrogate and document the complex 'biography' of theatrical costumes (Kopytoff, 2006: 64-91). Although Kopytoff's research focused upon the anthropological implications of 'cultural redefinition', his biographical method of analysis is equally applicable to the shift which occurs when theatrical costumes are transformed from 'ephemeral garments' into 'historical objects' deemed worthy of long term preservation, expert care and conservation. Constructing the 'biography' of a theatre costume offers a means through which to explore the numerous 'associations' and 'identities' it can accumulate during a life cycle which, as has been discussed, often includes not only damage, repair and alteration, but potentially 'translation' to different performers and productions. Most significantly, as Dinah Eastop has demonstrated, this mode of analysis 'allows the different values attributed to these "life stages" to be brought into sharper focus' (Eastop, 2003: 107).

When introducing the contact of an 'object biography' Kopytoff suggests,

> In doing the biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its "status" and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realised? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognised "ages" or periods in the thing's "life," and what are the cultural markers for them? (Kopytoff, 2006: 67).

Taking this into account, it is first necessary to establish the 'typical biography' for costumes in the period on which the investigation is focussing.

An article published in the *Wellington Evening Post* in 1903 which explored the fate of 'Discarded Stage Costume,' offers an insight into the typical biography of a stage costume in the early 1900s. The author spoke to a range of costumiers and discovered that, 'modern stage costumes,' (presumably those which replicated 'fashionable dress'), were easy to dispose of with 'Secondhand costumiers [doing] a regular trade in soiled costumes, not only among middle class actresses, but also among the great middle-class public in private life' for whom they off a means to 'dress fashionably and economically' (n.a., 1903: 10). As the author records, the life cycle of 'Pantomime dress, and character dress and the costumes of ball performers' was, more complex. Most of these costumes would have been gradually and, in some instances, completely, 'renewed' during the run of a production. If, thanks to this 'constant renovation,' costumes survived in good condition by the close of a production there was a strong probability that, after first being sent to 'the cleaner,' they would then be

packed away. Barring a revival, they were then retained to be sold, often as part of a complete 'set' to use in a production elsewhere. Many theatrical costumes were also, the author suggests, of such quality that were 'regular sales of second-hand and disused music-hall and pantomime costumes in London' and, in some instances, generous theatrical managers and performers donated older costumes to 'poorer performers.' As this account makes apparent, however, very few stage costumes survived intact or with a clear link to a single and identifiable original wearer and production, and whether by gift, sale or purchase, a theatre costume was generally passed 'down the social scale of artistes' until it was either recycled into a new garment, or discarded (n.a., 1903: 10).

Drawing upon this information, it is possible employ the biographical methodology outlined by Kopytoff to chart the 'typical biography' of a stage costume at the height of Terry's career. This 'typical biography' breaks down an intentionally simplified outline of a costume's 'life cycle' into Kopytoff's model of 'recognised "ages" or periods' which, in this instance, are delineated as the six 'periods' outlined below:

A 'Typical Biography' of a 19th Century stage costume:

Period 1: 'Design and creation'

Period 2: First Performance

Period 3: Return to Wardrobe

Period 4: 'Repair' or 'Adaptation' for the same, or a new, wearer (repair and adaptation might also occur during the run of the original production)

Period 5: Second Performance (in the same, or an alternative production)

Period 6: 'Disposal' through sale, gift or destruction

Whilst the life cycle model created for a 'typical biography' offers a useful starting point for research, the varied histories of Terry's surviving costumes show that these garments have the potential to accumulate much more complex biographies. Terry's surviving costumes therefore include additional periods which diverge beyond the biographical model created for a 'typical' stage costume. With this in mind a new model, adapted to document the 'Actual Biography' of the 'Beetlewing Dress', is outlined below:

An 'Actual Biography' for the 'Beetlewing Dress'

- **Period 1: 'Creation' (circa 1887-8) –** Dress designed by Comyns-Carr in collaboration with Terry and made by Nettleship, (possibly with assistance from her staff). The original cost of the costume is unknown, but given the price Terry paid for comparable garments in the 1892 production of *King Arthur* it is likely to have been between £100 and £150 (Comyns-Carr, 1926: 80) (n.a., 1900: 2).

- **Period 2: First Performance (1888-9) –** The production opened on the 29th of December of 1888 and ran for one hundred and fifty nights (Manvell, 1968:196-7). Terry's performance inspired the portrait by Singer Sargent (1889).

- **Period 3: Return to Wardrobe/ Stock Costume (1889-1902) –** The production remained in the Lyceum repertoire and the costume remained in use until Terry left the company in 1902. *Macbeth* was revived both on tour and in London and, as the two surviving bodices indicate, at least one 'copy' of the costume was made.

- **Period 4: Personal 'Costume' and Private 'Performance' (1902-1928) –** After 1902 the costume was removed from the Lyceum wardrobe and became part of Terry's private collection. It is likely that Terry wore this costume, as she

did other costumes from the production, for other informal performances outside the context of the Lyceum Theatre.

- **Period 5: Public 'Costume' (1928-1939) –** After Terry's death in 1928 her daughter inherited the house and collection. Whilst in Craig's ownership, and to an extent during Terry's lifetime, the costumes, including the 'Beetlewing Dress,' were lent to a number of actresses for stage performances and worn in a variety of other contexts. In some instances, they were modified and adapted. At this stage in its life cycle the commercial value of the costume had greatly diminished, though it remained one of Terry's most famous costumes (n.a., 1903: 10).

- **Period 6: 'Museum Artefact' (1939-Present) –** Terry's existing collection, was not subject to disposal or sale but instead expanded and re-presented by Craig who established a Memorial Museum at Smallhythe Place. Pieces from the collection were lent for public display, and when the property passed to the National Trust in 1939 the costumes were officially established as part of a museum collection. Since the 1980s the 'Beetlewing Dress' has been altered and adapted for display, but not for wear (Tinker, 2010). Following the £110,000 conservation treatment completed in 2011, the costume has been 'conserved' and is now presented in a manner which is as close to its original appearance as was possible to achieve (Kennedy, 2011: n.p.).

Carriers of Meaning and Identity

This biographical approach to analysis exposes the significant role that the wearer(s) play in shaping the biography of surviving costumes. It also highlights the degree to which this intimate connection between costume and wearer results, as Donatella

Barbieri has suggested, in the garment becoming a 're-embodiment' of the individual(s) who have worn it (Barbieri, 2013:295). In certain instances, the connection between a costume and the original wearer is so powerful that, as Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones, and Barbara Hodgdon, have argued, theatrical costumes become imbued with both the physicality and personality of their original wearer. Such costumes thus become 'carriers of identity' with the potential to preserve and re-create a shared memory of both the original wearer and their performance (Jones and Stallybrass, 2000: 177) (Hodgdon, 2006: 160-4). Whilst for many examples of historic 'fashionable dress' the identity of the original wearer remains unknown, for historic theatre costume it is often the connection with a famous performer(s) which has secured their preservation (Isaac, 2008). Consequently, any analysis of a historic theatre costume must consider the associations which develop between such garments and their wearer(s), and the degree to which such garments become imbued with the identity of the performer(s) who has worn them.

Looking closely at the afterlives of the costumes Terry wore in the 1888 production of *Macbeth,* and at the Beetlewing Dress in particular, revealed that such garments are often seen to be channelling their past wearer(s), participating in what Hodgdon, drawing upon Joseph Roach's work on the same theme, described as '[…] a form of surrogation.' (Hodgdon, 2006: 159-161) (Roach, 1996). Considering the extant costume as a 'surrogate' for the absent body offers a framework through which to understand and analyse the emotional potency of 'resurrected' theatre costumes: specifically the manner in which such garments, whether used in performance or mounted for display, can take on the role of an 'effigy,' perpetuating 'memory' of the lost production, and literally, 're-membering,' the absent performer (Roach, 1996, 36). Through their participation in this act of 'surrogation' costumes become carriers of

'memory' and 'identity' with the ability to conjure up the 'ghosts,' not only of an interlinked cycle of performances, but also of specific performers (Carlson, 2002: 2, 58-9).

This framework can be applied to analyse and explain the actress, Sybil Thorndike's, description of the 'power' attributed to Terry's costumes. After her death, and during her lifetime, many of Terry's costumes were worn by other performers, including Thorndike, in 1921. Learning that she was to play Lady Macbeth at an important celebration in Paris, Terry's daughter, Edith Craig, insisted that Thorndike borrow Terry's costumes for the role declaring, 'Oh, you must wear mother's dresses, beetle wing, the great cloak, sleepwalking blankets the lot. They'll play the part _for_ you' (Craig, quoted in Thorndike, 1960) Thorndike, who eagerly agreed to the loan, was certain that the beetlewing dress, in particular, played a transformative role in her performance. Recalling the incident in 1960 she explained:

> […] on those grand formal occasions I'm always terribly nervous, paralytic in fact. The moment I put on Ellen's dress, something happened, not a tremor, not a quake, I waltzed through the play on air. When it came to the banquet scene the fine American star lost himself, his nerve went. But the beetlewing dress came to the rescue. I wasn't a very hefty girl in those days but something pushed me from behind and I took hold of that huge man and I hurled him across the stage, whispering his words in his ear. And all was well again, afterwards he said to me 'Oh thank you my dear, I was lost, you saved me.' I said don't thank me that was Ellen Terry's dress, she pushed me on. That's what Ellen did to her dresses (Thorndike, 1960).

Conclusion

This article has focussed on the biography of a single historic theatre costume; Ellen Terry's 'Beetlewing Dress'. 'Re-contextualising' Ellen Terry's 'Beetlewing Dress' by drawing upon a range of related material culture sources, it has traced this costume's evolution, from its original purpose as an ephemeral garment, created for a specific wearer and production, through to its current identity, as a historically significant museum artefact, commemorating Terry's original performance (Hodgdon, 2006:138-9).

The primary aim of the article was to introduce a new methodology, founded upon material culture approaches, for the analysis of historic theatre costume and through which it is possible to investigate and articulate their significant role as carriers of meaning, memory and identity. The close analysis of Terry's 'Beetlewing Dress' made apparent the range of themes which historic theatre costume has the potential to illuminate, not least, the influence of social, historic and artistic context on their creation, public reception, and 'afterlives'. This analysis also established that the theatre costumes preserved in museum and archive collections represent a departure from the 'Typical Biography' of such garments and that, in their transfer to such collections, these costumes take on a new role as 'effigies' working to 're-member' their original wearer(s) and performance(s).

The rich range of source material which survives to document Terry's career, and, significantly for this article, her engagement in the design and creation of her costumes, made an important contribution to the depth of this discussion. It is recognised that not all investigations can hope to draw upon a comparable quantity of surviving costumes and that the level of agency Terry exercised over her stage dress

was unusual. Nevertheless, investigations into historic theatre costume are not dependent upon the existence of surviving costumes and a wide range of supporting sources (including, but not limited to, paintings, letters, photographs, theatre accounts and newspaper reviews), can be drawn on to 're-assemble' the missing garments. Similarly, the methodology presented is not confined to the analysis of costumes created within the nineteenth century, indeed, it was intentionally created with scope for application to earlier and later time periods in mind.

There are some modifications which would need to be made to apply this biographical methodology to certain time periods. The 'Typical Biography' previously outlined in this article, for instance, represented the expected life cycle of a theatrical costume during the peak of Terry's career. For late twentieth and early twenty-first century theatre costumes however, it is necessary to add an additional 'life cycle period,' which takes into account the new possibility that the costume might be transferred to a 'Hire Wardrobe.' This is standard practice within many contemporary companies working with theatre costume, and was the fate of a pair of leather trousers worn by the actor David Tennant (b.1971) when playing Romeo in the 2000 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Transferred to the Hire Wardrobe after the close of the production, they were reclaimed when Tennant rose to fame in the title role of BBC Television series, *Doctor Who* (Howells, 2008)*.* The trousers therefore form part of a 'chain of meaning' in which their identity shifted from a dynamic theatrical costume created for a specific role and wearer, to a generic garment available for public hire, through to their current and potentially final iconic celebrity status as 'David Tennant's Leather trousers' and, as such, a museum object with the potential to carrier the identity of, and act as a surrogate for, their original wearer (Pearce, 1994: 26-29).

Allowing for this additional stage in their life cycle, the 'typical biography' of a theatre costume would therefore encompass the following seven 'periods':

'Typical Biography' of a 20th and 21st century stage costume:

Period 1: 'Design and creation'

Period 2: First Performance

Period 3: Return to Wardrobe

Period 4: 'Repair' or 'Adaptation' for the same, or a new, wearer (repair and adaptation might also occur during the run of the original production)

Period 5: Second Performance (in the same, or an alternative production)

Period 6: Transfer to 'Hire Wardrobe'

Period 7: 'Disposal' through sale, gift or destruction

Establishing the 'typical biography' of costumes in the period under investigation offers a useful starting point for research, as the varied histories of Terry's surviving garments has made apparent, however, costumes have the potential to accumulate much more complex biographies. Researchers are therefore advised to adapt this 'Typical Biography' to create an 'Actual Biography' for the garment(s) under investigation: paying particular attention to when, how, and why, its biography departs from the expected life cycle of theatre costumes during the period in which it was created.

Adopting a biographical approach to analysis will enable researchers to document and examine the multi-layered history of a costume. Attention must also be paid also to evolutions in the 'meaning' and 'identities' carried by the garment at different stages

during this lifecycle, which are directly shaped by both the individuals who wear them, and the 'contexts' within they are used. For this reason, it is essential that investigations fully explore the 'contexts' (historical, physical and cultural) within which a theatre costume has been used. The same importance should be attached to discovering the past wearer(s) of the costume. Only then is it possible to record the multiple 'meanings' and 'identities' that can be simultaneously present within a single costume and, through this, to gain a full understanding of the impact these associations have upon the 'historical' and 'emotional' significance' attached to such garments.

Whilst this article has focused primarily on a single surviving theatre costume, drawn from the wardrobe of a nineteenth century actress, the applicability of the methodology presented extends far beyond the parameters of this investigation. This biographical approach to analysis offers a strong platform for further research into the complex 'biographies' of historic stage costume, in particular their 'afterlives.' Most significantly, it provides a means through which to investigate and articulate the role surviving theatre costumes play in 're-membering' lost productions and performers.

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Illustrations

Figure 1: John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), *Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth*, 1889. Oil on canvas. 221 x 114 cm. London. © Tate Britain, London, Museum Number N02053.

Figure 2: Window & Grove, *Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth in 'Macbeth'*, Lyceum Theatre, 1888. Sepia Photograph on paper. 14.2 x10.1cm. London. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Museum Number S.133:426-2007.

Figure 3: Window & Grove, *Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth in 'Macbeth'*, Lyceum Theatre, 1888. Sepia Photograph on paper. 14.2 x10.1cm. London. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Museum Number S.133:429-2007.

Figure 4: David Levenson, *Ellen Terry's beetle wing dress as displayed in the new Costume Gallery at Smallhythe Place, Kent.* ©National Trust Images/David Levenson.

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[1] Terry's approach to design was partly shaped by her relationships with two leading figures in the Aesthetic movement, the painter, George Frederick Watts (1817-1904) and the architect and designer, Edward Godwin (1833-1886) (Terry, 1908: 150).

[2] Irving's surviving costumes include an ensemble consisting of two cloaks, tunic, under-doublet and boots in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Museum Number S.2722:1 to 6-2010 and a further ensemble consisting of cloak, tunic, jerkin/underdoublet, pair of boots and brooch, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Museum number S.2724:1 to 6-2010.

[3] The ensemble, which included red silk velvet slippers is also in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Museum Number S.2723:1 to 3-2010.

[4] One of the largest collections of material relating to Terry was assembled by the actress and her daughter, Edith Craig (1869-1947). Housed at Terry's former home, Smallhythe Place, both the property and the collection were transferred to the custodianship of the National Trust upon Craig's death.