

**THE LADY ACTRESS:  
RECOVERING THE LOST  
LEGACY OF A VICTORIAN  
AMERICAN SUPERSTAR**

By Dr. Kelly S. Taylor



*The Wapshott Dress*



THE LADY ACTRESS:  
RECOVERING THE LOST LEGACY OF A  
VICTORIAN AMERICAN SUPERSTAR

Published by  
The Wapshott Press  
An Imprint of J LHLS  
PO Box 31513  
Los Angeles, CA 90031  
www.WapshottPress.com

Copyright © 2009 by Kelly S. Taylor

First printing March 2009

Portions of this book have appeared in modified and edited  
form in the following publications:

“Exploiting the Medium: Mesmerism and the Strange Case of  
Anna Cora Mowatt.” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 16:4,  
(1996):321-335. (Peer Reviewed) (1.1b)

“The Creation of a Public Persona in the Poetry of Anna Cora  
Mowatt.” *American Periodicals* 11, (2001):65-80.

“Fear, Loathing, and Fashion: Self-Creation in the Comedy of  
Anna Cora Mowatt.” *Theater Annual* 54, (2001):43-61.

All rights reserved. No part of this is publication may be  
reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic  
or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information  
storage and retrieval system now known or to be invented, without  
permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer  
who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with a review  
written for inclusion in a magazine, newspaper, or broadcast.

ISBN: 978-0-615-26250-5

06 05 04 03 4 3 2 1

Cover design by Kelly S. Taylor



## Acknowledgements

As is usually true, a lot of people have had a hand in bringing this book to life. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Mary Frances Hopkins of Louisiana State University for all the evenings she generously let me sit at her kitchen table and work through trouble spots in this manuscript while feeding me the most delicious pecan pralines ever to pass the lips of a mortal.

I'd like to thank my ex-husband John Taylor for the love, support, and space he gave me for writing – and for not dying of impatience before it was done.

Thanks to Dr. Ruth Bowman, Dr. Michael Bowman, Dr. Harold Mixon, and Dr. Gresna Doty to their invaluable input on this research project.

Thanks to the readers who gave insightful advice on tailoring this work to a non-academic audience. In particular, I want to thank Jane Seaton for seeing that each “i” was dotted and each “t” crossed.

Many thanks to Cindy Gordon and Karen Kimball for the excellent job they did in doing the final round of proofreading on this book.

Finally, I want to give an big, expansive, positively Victorian effusion of authorial gratitude to Ginger Mayerson for making my dream of finally publishing this little volume come true!



# Table of Contents

1. FASHIONED LADY: THE LIFE AND MANY CAREERS OF ANNA CORA MOWATT .....	1
2. A RADIANTLY BEAUTIFUL SMILE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF ANNA CORA MOWATT .....	15
3. FASHIONING THE CHARM: THE RHETORIC OF ANNA CORA MOWATT'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY .....	37
4. SEDUCTIONS OF THE HALF-SEEN WORLD: THE DEFENSE OF THE CREATED SELF IN ANNA CORA MOWATT'S FICTION .....	69
5. FEAR, LOATHING AND FASHION: SELF-CREATION IN ANNA CORA MOWATT'S DRAMA .....	103
6. EXPLOITING THE MEDIUM: ANNA CORA MOWATT'S CREATION OF SELF THROUGH PERFORMANCE .....	141
7. A FAIRY'S DREAM: SELF-CREATION IN THE POETRY OF ANNA CORA MOWATT .....	169
8. "AND EARTH IS FLEETING BY:" REFLECTIONS ON THE LEGACY OF ANNA CORA MOWATT .....	191
NOTES .....	211
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	228
APPENDIX A .....	237
APPENDIX B .....	239
APPENDIX C .....	243



## CHAPTER 1

### **FASHIONED LADY: THE LIFE AND MANY CAREERS OF ANNA CORA MOWATT**

Anna Cora Mowatt Ritchie, a mid-nineteenth century American author, public reader, playwright and actress, was a well-known and respected figure among her contemporaries in American literary and dramatic circles. Despite this, she is largely forgotten to modern theater lovers. In her day, she played to packed theaters and could number Edgar Allen Poe, David Henry Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson among her fans. Oral Interpretation scholars have called her the first “lady” elocutionist because she was the first female to enter the career of public reader without a previous career on the stage. In 1989, John Gentile, writing a history of prominent solo performers, credited her, along with famed actresses Fanny Kemble and Charlotte Cushman, with bringing to solo performance a level of prestige previously unknown in America. He claimed that they, as respectable women in a traditionally disrespected career, brought a respectability and an acceptance that allowed women of a later age to enjoy professional platform careers.<sup>1</sup> Her brief career as a public reader inspired many imitators.

Mowatt was also one of the first American women to achieve popular success as a playwright. Mrs. Mercy Warren, Charlotte Lennox and Susan Rowson were among her few forerunners. Her best remembered play, *Fashion*, was acclaimed by audiences and critics alike. The comedy

## THE LADY ACTRESS

frequently appears in contemporary anthologies of representative American dramas. Theater historians mark *Fashion* as one of the first successful efforts to create a distinctively American comedy of manners.<sup>1</sup> Following the success of *Fashion*, Mowatt reigned as one of the queens of American drama during her eight year acting career.

Off the stage, Mowatt played a wide range of roles—many of which would seem to contradict each other in light of the particular time, place, and social context of her life. She identified herself as both an actress and a respectable member of the American upper class. She worked outside her home to support herself and her husband, but still saw herself as a quite conventional wife and daughter.

Despite her radical career choices, it would be misleading to label Mowatt as a feminist. She was not sympathetic with the efforts of the early proponents of the Woman's Movement in America. She continually deferred to men and conventional middle-class values. However, when the conventional expectations of her peers would have made her a pariah, Anna Cora Mowatt rejected these perceived limitations. Through successfully creating and defending discursive authority for herself in her works, Mowatt won the freedom to assume social roles previously thought to be outside the definition of what it meant to be a proper upper-class lady in Victorian America.

For instance, many features of Mowatt's sociocultural context worked against a person who wanted to seek fame via a stage career and still wished to be perceived as a "lady." Mowatt's decision was shocking not only because it took her out of the womanly sphere of house and home, but because she was opting to go as a participant to a place where most "decent" people were uneasy about going even as spectators. Despite the respect and admiration given individual actors such as Fanny Kemble, Edmund Kean, and others, actors and actresses were generally viewed as low and common persons. After visiting America in the early part of the 19th century, English writer

Mrs. Trollope concluded that the general public in America did not approve of theatrical exhibitions. Her complaint about Cincinnati is typical of her comments about the few American cities where she found theaters:

[Cincinnati has] a theater, which is, in fact, the only public amusement of this *triste* little town; but they seem to care little about it, and either from economy or distaste, it is very poorly attended. Ladies are rarely seen there, and by far the larger proportion of females deem it an offense against religion to witness the representation of a play.<sup>2</sup>

Clara Morris, a 19th century American actress, wrote in her autobiography that “even the people who did not think all actors drunkards and all actresses immoral did think they were a lot of flighty, silly buffoons, not to be taken seriously for a moment.” She went on to complain that although the cloud of public suspicion was beginning to lift by the 1860’s, the individual actor “had no social standing.”<sup>3</sup>

Not only was the vagabond lifestyle of actors suspect and their morality thought dubious at best, many believed that an actor or actress engaged in the art of mimesis at the peril of his/her own soul.

One minister wrote in 1827:

The effect of the kind of life led by players is peculiarly pernicious to the female character. It strips it of all its loftier attributes, its softer and more delicate charms. Sensibility, modesty and refinement are gradually extinguished by the unfeminine and indelicate business of the stage and nothing is left but the hackneyed and haggard form of injured humanity,

## THE LADY ACTRESS

covered and bedecked perhaps, by false and tawdry ornaments. A few female actors may have preserved their virtue, but alas! how many have lost it forever by their connection with the stage. And if others have not been entirely ruined by this means, how greatly must their character have suffered in purity and elevation, by the dark forms of evil with which they come into such close and continual contact.<sup>4</sup>

The stage was condemned from the pulpit and shunned by many respectable persons.<sup>5</sup> With the exception of the Episcopal Church, virtually every Protestant sect in America officially and unequivocally declared the theater the haunt of sinners.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, religious leaders even promoted a belief that mere association with actors and actresses was morally injurious. Reverend Robert Hatfield rhetorically asked his flock, “Let me ask you, my young friend, justly proud of your sister, would you rather not follow her to her grave tonight than to know that tomorrow she shall stand at the altar and pledge her faith and trust her precious future to an actor?”<sup>7</sup> Reverend Thomas DeWitt Talmadge, pastor of the largest congregation in New York during the 1870’s, declared that most people would rather see their children “five feet under the ground of Greenwood” than “in a month’s association with actors.”<sup>8</sup>

Although it is difficult to document how widely the general public shared the views promoted by many churches, it is clear that theatrical professionals believed the populace was inclined against them. American actor John Hodginson wrote in his 1797 autobiography of “strong and widely held prejudices” against the profession.<sup>9</sup> Successful theatrical managers William Wood, Sol Smith, and Noah Ludlow, all complained bitterly about the church’s antipathy

towards theater and indicated its destructive effect on the profession.<sup>10</sup> Albert A. Palmer, a successful theater owner and manager, wrote in 1895 that by his estimate at least seven-tenths of the population in mid-century still looked on theater attendance as “almost a sin.”<sup>11</sup>

In advice he dispensed in his July 19, 1845, review of Mowatt’s acting debut at the Park Theater, Edgar Allan Poe warned Mowatt of dangers to her reputation. He perceived that certain choices she made concerning the scheduling of her debut could harm her standing in the theatrical community:

She has erred, we think, in making this arrangement—that is to say, she has somewhat injured the prestige of her name, first appearing at a summer theater, and secondly in appearing again after so brief an interval. Mrs. Mowatt owes it to herself to maintain a certain dignity; and, although this certain dignity be preposterous, in fact in the fiction of the world’s view it is all important. A lady so well-connected, and so well established in the public eye by her literary career, could have had no difficulty in coming upon the stage in her own fashion, and almost on her own terms. The Park, as the place of her debut, was, of course, unobjectionable, although in a negative sense. She lost no caste by coming out here, but the fact cannot be disputed that she would have gained much by first appearing in London, and presenting herself to her country men and country women with the eclat of a foreign reputation. We say this, with a bitter sense of our national degradation, and subserviency to British opinion—we say it, moreover, with a consciousness that Mrs. Mowatt should not have done this thing however much it

## THE LADY ACTRESS

would have furthered her interests.<sup>12</sup>

Even among actors, Poe implied, there were degrees of respectability that Mowatt needed to take into consideration.

In the same article he went on to refute the anti-theatrical prejudice he noted among his peers:

We have no sympathies with the prejudices which would entirely have dissuaded Mrs. Mowatt from the stage. There is no cant more contemptible than that which habitually decries the theatrical profession - a profession, which, in itself, embraces all that can elevate and ennoble, and absolutely nothing to degrade. If some—if many—or if nearly all of its members are dissolute, this is an evil arising not from the profession itself, but from the unhappy circumstances which surround it. With these circumstances Mrs. Mowatt has, at present, no concern. With talents, enthusiasm, and energy, she will both honor the stage and derive from it honor. In the mere name of actress she can surely find nothing to dread - nothing, or she would be unworthy of the profession - not the profession unworthy of her. The theater is ennobled by its high facilities for the development of genius—facilities not afforded elsewhere in equal degree. By the spirit of genius, we say, it is ennobled—it is sanctified—beyond the sneer of the fool or the cant of the hypocrite.<sup>13</sup>

Although as the son of actors, Poe was not an unbiased observer, he, too, noted and decried the lack of regard for actors he saw demonstrated by his peers.

In addition to contemporary feeling against theater, many Victorians seemed, as Leslie Hume and Karen Offen stated in *Victorian Women*, reluctant to accept women who did any sort of work outside the home:

As that gospel [of work] concerned women, however, it had a narrow application. Victorian prescriptive literature celebrated women's work in the home and applauded the notion

of good household management. But authors of those texts—many of whom were women—did not acknowledge, much less celebrate, women’s work outside the domestic sphere. In fact, they promoted an ideology of domesticity that perpetuated the notion that the only appropriate working activities for women were domestic tasks. Like the French historian Jules Michelet, they believed that the term *ouvriere* (working woman) was an “impiety,” an outrage.<sup>14</sup>

Although an estimated 9.7% of American women worked in 1870, making up 14.8% of the total working population, the working woman was still a questionable figure.<sup>15</sup>

No one forbade American women of the pre-Civil War period to write and publish poems, novels, non-fiction or even plays. A good number of women did and made a respectable amount of money for their efforts. However, many people were not entirely at ease with the idea of women writers. In a letter to his publisher William Ticknor in January of 1855, Nathaniel Hawthorne referred to them as a “d—d mob of scribbling women.”<sup>16</sup> The reputedly ‘gentle-hearted’ Charles Lamb said of English poetess Letitia Elizabeth Landon in 1854, “If she belonged to me, I would lock her up on bread and water till she left off writing poetry. A female poet, or female author of any kind, ranks below an actress, I think.”<sup>17</sup>

In entering the marketplace as writers, women were trespassing into economic as well as intellectual territory traditionally held by men. Many like Hawthorne feared that “the ink-stained Amazons will expel their rivals by actual pressure, and petticoats wave triumphantly over all the field.”<sup>18</sup> Although women could walk onto the playing field of the literary market in the early nineteenth century, they had to step carefully in order to avoid male ire and/or being labeled unfeminine. Sarah Josepha Hale cautioned aspiring poetesses in her Lady’s Magazine (a precursor to Godey’s Lady’s Book):

## THE LADY ACTRESS

The path of poetry, like every other path in life, is to the tread of women, exceedingly circumscribed. She may not revel in the luxuriance of fancies, images and thoughts, or indulge in the license of choosing themes at will, like the Lords of creation.<sup>19</sup>

Sara Clarke, a popular authoress who published under the pseudonym “Grace Greenwood,” wrote in the preface to *Greenwood Leaves* that “true feminine genius is ever timid, doubtful, and clingingly dependent; a perpetual childhood. A true woman shrinks from greatness.” She cautioned other would-be female writers that the true joys of creativity were, “for the masters of the lyre; it can never be felt by women with great intensity; at least, can never satisfy her.”<sup>20</sup> Female authors, no matter how successful, were characteristically reluctant to take credit for their own creations. Harriet Beecher Stowe announced that “God wrote” *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Susan Warner’s sister explained that Warner had written her sentimental bestseller *The Wide, Wide World* (published in 1850) “in close reliance upon God; for thoughts, for power and for words... In that sense, the book was written on her knees.”<sup>21</sup> Catharine Maria Sedgwick claimed that when writing she was “but the instrument of God.”<sup>22</sup> Because of the challenge it presented to male authority, while not forbidden, the role of woman writer was not a comfortable one.

Anna Cora Mowatt was able to establish discursive authority in the face of such social sanctions because she actively exercised (and even today posthumously exercises) control over the interpretation of her actions. Mowatt was, in the language of modern public relations experts, her own best “spin doctor.” Much that we know of Mowatt comes from her own autobiography. In this work, and all the other modes of public expression Mowatt used—non-fiction, fiction, performance, plays, and poetry—she employed potent rhetorical strategies to present herself, her desires, and her

motivations in a way that would mitigate the effects of her society's prejudices without alienating her auditors.

In her introduction to *Fictions of Authority*, Susan Lanser states that before anyone can speak with true authority about woman writers and the strategies they employ to establish an authoritative voice, many more studies of women's texts from many different cultures and from many different vantage points must be done.<sup>23</sup> Anna Cora Mowatt was a white, Western, upper-class woman like Jane Austen, George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte and others that Lanser profiles in her book. However, looking at Mowatt's life and various works has given me, as a researcher, the opportunity to examine a woman's attempts to establish discursive authority in many creative forms other than just the novel. Anna Cora Ogden Mowatt Ritchie was a lady who lived up to the complexity and variety of her elaborate composite name. A Renaissance woman of the Victorian era, she achieved popular and critical success in an impressively wide range of creative outlets. She was also successful in her quest to create through rhetorical/textual strategies an authoritative voice in her varied works. In these works, Mowatt fashioned a public voice for herself without appearing to her auditors to be a cunning, manipulative, usurper of masculine power.

I have chosen to refer to Anna Cora Ogden Mowatt Ritchie throughout this study as Anna Cora Mowatt. After her second marriage, she dropped Mowatt and adopted her husband's surname. However, since she achieved fame as an actress, playwright, author, and public reader as Mowatt, contemporary references use that name. To avoid confusion, I have decided to refer to her consistently as Mowatt rather than switching back and forth or using Mowatt-Ritchie as she never did.

Mowatt's life was a process of constant negotiation. Although she did enjoy the privileges of class, as a woman and an actress, she was often outside spheres of power in her culture. As Susan Lanser points out in *Fictions of Authority*,

## THE LADY ACTRESS

social identity is linked to narrative form. The authority of a given voice or text is produced from a conjunction of social and rhetorical practices. What Lanser calls discursive authority, or the intellectual credibility, ideological validity, and aesthetic value claimed by or conferred upon a work, author, narrator or textual practice, is produced interactively with specific receiving communities.<sup>24</sup> As Lanser states, discursive authority in mid-nineteenth century was most readily available to white, educated men of hegemonic ideology.<sup>25</sup> However, because narrative authority is also constituted through textual/rhetorical strategies that even socially unauthorized voices may appropriate, Mowatt, despite her gender and her profession, had the opportunity to fight for an authoritative public voice. As a nonhegemonic writer she had to, as Lanser emphasizes, “strike a delicate balance in accommodating and subverting the status quo.”<sup>26</sup> This book is an inquiry into Anna Cora Mowatt’s quest to fashion a self who could speak with an authoritative public voice. I devote a chapter to a sample of each genre of public expression Mowatt used: nonfiction, fiction, performance, play-writing, and poetry.

I have allowed myself the luxury of choosing several texts for examination that have an obvious autobiographical bent. However, I think it would be equally possible and profitable for a researcher to take the same approach to any other works by Mowatt. The author carefully creates a public persona in her anonymous articles on housekeeping and *Life of Goethe*, (the only work she wrote under a male pseudonym) just as she does in her autobiography. The novels *Evelyn* and *The Mute Singer* contain ideas that gently contradict popular beliefs just as *Mimic Life* does. An examination of Mowatt’s successful portrayal of numerous beloved ingénues could be as productive as my look at her private experimentation with mesmerism. The play *Armand* says as much about its time as does *Fashion*. “On a Lock of My Mother’s Hair” or the verse play *Pelayo* provide fields of study as rich as the poem “My Life.” In short,

I did not set out to exhaust Mowatt and her works as a subject for study.

From her body of non-fictional writing, I have chosen to look at her autobiography. Mowatt was able to get around the difficulties of writing as a woman in the first person when writing her autobiography by giving solid, believable, acceptable reasons for writing, and for creating a writing persona that appeared frank, candid, and genuinely humble. In this non-fictional work, Mowatt wooed her suspicious public by fashioning an implied self that was not proud, self-aggrandizing, or threateningly unfeminine. She created a narrative voice that readers could feel comfortable indulging with their attention while crafting a narrative framework for her life story that was familiar to her auditors. In the absence of an appropriate pattern for women's life stories, Mowatt borrowed from popular fiction and skillfully employed narrative devices that enhanced her credibility as a speaker by underplaying the aggressive unconventionality of her life story.

*Mimic Life* extends the work Mowatt started in her autobiography in fictional form. Mowatt employed the authoritative public voice that she had so carefully created in her non-fictional account of her life to carry on her fight against the anti-theatrical prejudice she found among her peers. Through the creation of sympathetic characters and narratives filled with pathos, she attempted to turn the tide of contempt and disrespect in which she believed many conventional Victorians held the theater and its workers.

Although Mowatt was well-known and well-loved for her work on the public stage, as an example of her performance work I choose to look at a form of private theatrical. Mesmerism was a stage where upper class Victorians could ignore temporarily the strict social rules for their social strata and perform experiments testing their social/cultural beliefs. Working with her mesmerizers, Mowatt created an alternate persona that called herself "the Gypsy." In a way that the many

## THE LADY ACTRESS

true-hearted but hopelessly conventional maidens Anna Cora played before the public never could, the Gypsy voiced Mowatt's private dissatisfactions. The unreal Gypsy was free within the experimental context of mesmeric sessions to give vent to the full range of Mowatt's intelligence, aggression, and rebellion. Mowatt was never given the opportunity as an actress or in her own life to play a character as openly confrontational as the Gypsy.

Mowatt's hit comedy *Fashion* accurately tapped into a myriad of nagging fears and anxieties in her audience about the growing artificiality of interaction in urban life. Her unexpectedly masterful demonstration of narrative skill in creating the play promoted a vision of herself as the implied author that was worthy of her auditors' attention and admiration. This implied author was worldly enough to court both liberals and conservatives, while at the same time successfully walking the narrow line between satirizing and offending her own social class. Since the subject of the play was the appropriately feminine topic of "fashion," however, Mowatt's potentially unladylike expertise did not alarm her auditors.

Finally, Mowatt, like most "literary ladies" of her day, tried on the role of poetess for size. The lady poet, unlike the lady playwright or lady novelist, trespassed to a lesser degree onto what was culturally considered male literary territory. As Mowatt vigorously attempted to do in her forays into other artistic fields, the poetess could express herself publicly without automatically sacrificing her position as a lady. The metaphor-laden, ambiguous language common in women's poetry of this Post-Romantic age allowed the poetess to express deep feelings without necessarily making her social criticisms sharp or revealing many hard facts about herself.

Mowatt played both the rebel and the conservative in her time. By keeping her unconventionality carefully concealed by narrative and rhetorical acumen, Mowatt was able to have her

cultural cake and eat it too. She was an independent working woman in a time when, as Hume and Offen attest, upper and middle class writers and speakers often looked on such women with suspicion or scorn.<sup>58</sup> She presented herself to the public in the questionable roles of actress and lady author and still managed to pull off the feat of being generally acclaimed a lady.