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Selling Beauty, Claiming Power: Lillie Langtry and the Feminist Tensions of Victorian & Edwardian Celebrity Culture

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Abstract

This thesis explores how Lillie Langtry, a woman known for selling her beauty and feminine ideals, can be perceived as a feminist from modern day perspectives regarding circumstances of the time. Studying her life, 1853-1929. This topic is significant for a fashion history and theory perspective as it explores and challenges some beliefs surrounding Victorian and Edwardian womanhood. The topic can contribute to present-day discussions on feminism in fashion history by exploring feminism, consumption, celebrities, and the idea of being a muse to men, primarily in a patriarchal society.

The research methods used for this thesis include primary sources such as fashion, photographs, written articles, letters and reviews, with fashion and written sources being the most resourceful. There has been visual analysis towards artworks and garments such as William Frith's painting and dresses by the House of Worth. An essential case study takes place in chapter 3, comparing the lives led by Lillie Langtry and Ellen Terry, the struggles both actresses faced and how they overcame them differently

I hope the findings of this thesis provoke readers to understand the importance of context. One should never assume there is right or wrong but often some place in between. Do I believe that Langtry was a pioneer for feminism and should be praised for doing so? No, but I do think, especially in the period which is being

explored, that we should read into the background of the lives we often judge so easily without repercussions.

Introduction

William Powell Frith's 1881 painting '*A Private View at the Royal Academy*' (Fig. 1) is a fitting introduction to this thesis; it provides an insight into the society and scene in which Langtry thrived—surrounded by her wealthy friends and mentors. Frith's work enables an excellent analysis of the 1881 dress and societal expectations, especially regarding aesthetic dress. Frith's painting is examined in the book *Painting in the Victorian Age*, providing context to the attire he had painted Langtry and Terry. Edwina Ehrman suggests Frith's attention to fashion declined after his wife's death, as he no longer had her assistance. Ehrman questioned, "Why else would he depict Lillie Langtry and professional beauty and icon of style in a dress that had previously clothed one of the bridesmaids in *For Better and For Worse*" (Ehrman, 2007, p.127). Langtry's close friend Oscar Wilde appears in aesthetic dress as a movement leader. His deep purple velvet suit and dandy hat embody the aesthetic craze. Wilde contrasts with some of the men in the painting who do not take part in aesthetic dress, Frith illustrates the variety in society alongside the traditional Victorian attire as seen on William Gladstone taking the more mundane look.

It encapsulates the observer in the crowded room, enabling you to almost hear the chatter, laughter and even the sounds of champagne glasses clinking. Inspired by Mark Smith's work, he approached primary sources through sound, touch, and

smell (Smith, 2007). Frith's detail immerses the viewer in the world Langtry inhabited.

Figure 1:
William Powell-Frith
Private View at the Royal Academy 1881
(1885)

What does it mean to be a feminist? Can one definition capture such a complex, experience-driven ideology? Furthermore, should society judge personal choices without understanding the circumstances behind them? Instead, one should examine and strive to understand one's experiences in life instead of assumptions. Key themes include feminism, consumption, celebrity, and the muse.

Lillie Langtry's life embodied scandal and strategic sexual self-presentation. Some argue Langtry failed to embody modern feminist principles; she was involved in the framework of sexual economics, a concept explored by Roy Baumeister and Kathleen Vohs (2004), which suggests that some women exchange sexual relationships for social or material resources. In Langtry's case, these relationships gave her a place in society, securing status and influence. This thesis will examine the social and cultural context that led her to make such choices. Did she feel constrained by a lack of alternatives, or was she drawn to the attention and opportunities this lifestyle afforded her? Actress Ellen Terry, for example, found success without the same objectification, raising the question: why did Langtry, with her privileged background, choose this path? This thesis explores the social and cultural context behind these choices.

The first chapter will provide a biographical account of Langtry's life, analysing her experiences through the lens of feminist theory, consumer culture, celebrity, and the role of the muse. Primary sources such as magazine and newspaper articles, letters, and imagery will be fundamental to understanding whether Langtry is a feminist

from a modern perspective. The perspective people had on her will enable an understanding of the influence and impact she had on society. This section will explore whether Langtry's actions are feminist within the context of her time and how society influenced her decisions. A particular focus will be on her romantic and creative relationships, as well as her financial struggles and entrepreneurial endeavours.

The second chapter will examine Langtry's relationship with fashion and beauty, considering her impact on these industries. Through object analysis and exploring her collaborations with fashion houses and brands, this chapter will assess whether her approach contributed to the progression or regression of women's roles in advertising and consumer culture.

Finally, the third chapter will present a comparative case study of Ellen Terry, a contemporary of Langtry, who led a different life despite being in the same industry. While Langtry thrived in high society, Terry adopted a more bohemian approach, yet both women faced similar struggles under the constraints of a patriarchal society. Although very different, they were both jointly on par when it came to the sufferings faced by them and many other women of the time, both making similar sacrifices to survive the ruthless Victorian and Edwardian societies. Langtry's autobiography and other books that study both of their lives, such as actresses as working women, will be referred to throughout the chapter.

Through this analysis, this thesis strives to determine whether Lillie Langtry can be considered as a feminist figure for her time. Ultimately, this study will explore the complexities of defining feminism through historical figures whose lives challenge modern ideological boundaries. Considering the theorists' work and taking on the life led by Langtry, the thesis will conclude if Langtry can be perceived as a feminist from a modern perspective looking back contextually on standards of her life and not present day.

Literature Review

Lillie's Life

Lillie Langtry's autobiography, *The Days I Knew* (1925), is a pivotal primary source for analysing Langtry's life, particularly in the first chapter of this study. The text offers insights into her attire, friendships, and financial challenges, including details that were not widely known at the time of its publication and shed light on the 'Jersey Lily'.

Langtry provides context for key events, such as her attendance at a gathering celebrating literature and art, where she wore a black dress that drew the attention of artists like John Millais and Frank Miles. While some may interpret her choice as a bid for attention, Langtry attributes it to her mourning for her youngest brother, stating, "Being in deep mourning, I wore a very simple black, square-cut gown with no jewels" (1925, p.35). This account highlights the tension between public appearance and private grief, prompting connections to Lou Taylor's (2010) *Mourning Dress: A Costume and Social History,* which discusses public mourning attire's rarity and societal disapproval. *The Days I Knew* offers personal insights into Langtry's fashion and social decisions and is a key reference for this thesis.

Laura Beatty's (1999) *Lillie Langtry: Manners, Masks and Morals* is an essential biography for understanding Lillie Langtry's life, particularly from a critical perspective. Beatty critically reveals how Langtry curated her autobiography,

omitting aspects of her life. Beatty suggests that Langtry carefully curated her public persona, concealing elements that did not align with the aesthetic image she sought to project. The duality of Langtry's private and public life emerges as a central theme of the biography.

Beatty's analysis of Langtry's business ventures is less critical and aligns with the themes explored in this thesis. She examines how Langtry capitalised on her public persona as the ‘Jersey Lily’ to achieve financial independence, an uncommon victory for women of her time. Beatty highlights Langtry's entrepreneurial spirit, noting her interest in horse racing as a passion and a financial enterprise. She writes, "Lillie's racing, like her acting, was something she wanted to do well" (1999, p. 286). The book also highlights the rarity of Langtry's involvement in this traditionally male-dominated sphere, stating, "Few ladies owned or raced horses themselves." After a victory, Langtry was "toasted in champagne," emphasising her societal position (Langtry, 1999, p. 286).

However, Beatty's coverage of the last three decades of Langtry's life is notably brief, with only 16 pages dedicated to this period. This briefness leaves significant gaps, particularly considering Langtry's continued involvement in the arts during these years. Despite this, the biography provides a refreshing perspective on Langtry's life, especially when contrasted with her autobiography, *The Days I Knew*.

Society

In examining the societal context in which Lillie Langtry ascended, engaging with *Frith and fashion* by Edwina Ehrman (2006) felt essential. This work analyses a pivotal source that will feature prominently in the thesis, Frith's *Private View at the Royal Academy, 1881* (1883). The chapter explores the artist's relationship with Victorian dress. Ehrman notes, "Frith assembled a large collection of costumes to dress the subjects in his genre and modern life pictures, purchased from junk shops, costumiers, and occasionally his sitters" (2006, p. 114). Accounting for the painting's effectiveness in portraying the aesthetic dress of the period.

Her commentary examines the attire of figures such as Oscar Wilde, Ellen Terry, Lillie Langtry, Lord Leighton, and other prominent members of Victorian society who were influential in Langtry's life.

However, a notable limitation of the chapter is that Langtry receives less detailed attention than other subjects. Consequently, extracting specific information about her from this analysis is more challenging. It is important to acknowledge that the text focuses on Frith's relationship with painting fashion rather than a detailed study of Langtry herself.

Feminism

Tracy Davis's *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* offers critical insights into the feminist themes of this thesis. Davis examines the challenges faced by Victorian actresses, particularly the limitations imposed by age.

Davis highlights how Lillie Langtry was unlike many of her contemporaries, as she continued to act and earn a living from her profession until the end of her life, an achievement, as Davis (1991) notes, that was rare. Davis's work also sheds light on the role of fashion and the allure that actresses were required to maintain. Actresses were among the few women who "changed their clothes away from home" and whose "occupation necessitated the use of numerous fetishised garments" (Davis,1991, p. 138).

While Davis's work is innovative and informative, some aspects of her analysis can be criticised. For instance, Davis suggests that actresses' personal and professional lives could not be separated, arguing that they were "integrated components" (1991, p. xi). While Langtry's public persona as the ‘Jersey Lily’ was integral to her career, it does not encompass the entirety of her identity. She was an intelligent woman who loved to read and educate herself. Additionally, Langtry's private life was marked by personal tragedies, including the death of her family and ex-husband, who faced severe mental health challenges before his death (Kemp, 2014). These aspects of her life illustrate the multilayered nature of her identity, which is not simply being a beauty, which warrants deeper analysis into context.

Kerry Powell's *Women and Victorian Theatre* was another valuable resource for researching female actresses of the period. Powell argues that the theatre offered women "a rare opportunity to experience independence and power" (1997, p. 15), supporting the view that Lillie Langtry's financial independence was an achievement

for her time. Powell also highlights how actresses were often empowered and had an "intoxication" in controlling their professional interactions, particularly with men (1997, p. 3). This idea raises the question of whether Lillie felt empowered by her position on stage, where she had control over her audience, particularly male admirers.

Powell further suggests that Langtry was celebrated more for her beauty than acting talent, prompting consideration of whether her use of this sexual appeal aligns with feminist ideals. Powell also draws on the work of Lillie's close friend, Oscar Wilde, particularly his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which Wilde critiques Victorian society and its "lack of voice in women" (1997, p. 11).

Key theoretical concepts incorporated into the thesis include the works by Judith Butler in *Gender Troubles: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,* which explores the idea of gender performativity (2006, p.16). This concept can be perceived as a way of Langtry's self-presentation to society and observing if this contributed to or challenged feminism. Reading Butler's concept of gender performability prompted consideration of whether Langtry leveraged beauty and gender as tools of compliance within the patriarchal system.

Newspaper Archives

The *British Newspaper Archive* and *The Library of Congress* both provided a range of articles which held a significant role in understanding how Langtry personified feminism of the time. A typical example is the financial articles praising Langtry and her ability to support herself financially. An article titled "*How Favourite Actresses Save Their Money*" written by Kate Materson has Langtry alongside her peers, providing its readers with information on how these female actresses can make an income besides acting by themselves. The article states that Langtry is "the most conspicuous example of business acuteness" (1898, p.21).

Consumption

Lillie Langtry's influence on Victorian and Edwardian consumption forms a central theme of this dissertation, particularly as she was one of the first celebrities used in advertising. Lars Svendsen's *Fashion: A Philosophy* serves as a key theoretical framework, analysing the societal implications of fashion, including identity, class, and consumption.

Svendsen highlights fashion's role in constructing identity, noting that "identity is one of the seminal concepts for describing the function of fashion" (2006, p.137). Concepts such as conspicuous consumption and purchasing goods to signify social status are central to his analysis and were prevalent in Langtry's era (2006, p.41). He also examines the Trickle-Down Theory, where fashion trends originate in

the upper classes and spread downward the social system, and Bourdieu's diffusion model, which explores class imitation (2006, p.42).

The text explores fashion's artistic value, referencing Charles Worth, whose designs connected art and fashion, designing theatrical costumes worn by Langtry (Svendsen, 2006, p.91). While Svendsen critiques fashion, this dissertation will incorporate diverse perspectives to explore Langtry's role in shaping consumption, from advertising to her societal presence.

Celebrity

Pamela Church-Gibson's *Fashion and Celebrity Culture*, a key text, explores fashion's ties to celebrity. Church-Gibson argues that celebrity culture has deeply permeated public life, shaping fashion trends and societal ideals (2011, pp. 1-2). Celebrities are positioned as cultural products, embodying trends and ideals to maintain relevance, with figures like Lillie Langtry embodying this dynamic.

Key concepts in Church-Gibson's work include celebrity, a public figure rising above their field to become a cultural icon, and glamour, often linked to modern celebrity through associations with fashion and luxury (2011, p. 22). Conspicuous consumption is the display of wealth via goods endorsed by celebrities; this connects closely to Langtry's endorsements and influence on consumer behaviour.

Church-Gibson also explores the gaze, drawing from Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and challenging its dominance, favouring a "female gaze" prevalent in the fashion industry (2011, p. 127). Additionally, cultural capital is central, highlighting how celebrity-endorsed products elevate consumer status, as seen in Langtry's promotion of the ‘Jersey Lily’ persona for branding purposes.

While Church-Gibson's work primarily focuses on modern celebrity culture, its frameworks offer valuable insights for exploring Langtry's role as a 19th-century cultural icon. However, due to the lack of written work in the late 18th and early 19th century, other books and literature will need to be drawn upon for the celebrity.

A concept in Richard Dyer's book *Stars (1998)* called the "star vs character" provides valuable insight into the facade Langtry worked hard to preserve even after her death. Dyer highlights that the stars attempt to disguise the fact that "they are just as much produced images, constructed personalities as characters are" (1998, p.20). This idea is recognised in Langry's life, and her autobiography is a key example, although Langtry appears to be honest to the reader. However, further research and comparison with Beatty's work highlights the facade and that she continues to play the character of the Jersey Lily.

The Muse

Julie Springer's article *Art and the Feminine Muse: Women in Interiors by John White Alexander* in the Woman's Art Journal provides critical insights into the role of the muse and its symbolic significance in late 19th-century art. Although focused on

Alexander, the text offers valuable context for the period, exploring the artist-muse dynamic and the societal ideals reflected in art.

Springer highlights the frequent portrayal of women in interior settings and is rooted in stereotypes of women as delicate and pure. She discusses the idealisation of women, citing Lloyd Goodrich's observation that women were portrayed as "finer and purer than the male" (1966, p. 46). This aligns with early representations of Lillie Langtry, such as her nickname ‘The Jersey Lily’, which reinforced her image as a feminine ideal.

Symbolism is central to Springer's analysis, with objects like flowers and mirrors representing fragility, creativity, and physical perfection (1981, p.2-4). These elements provide a framework for analysing Langtry's portraits and their deeper meanings.

While Springer's work provides important context for understanding Langtry's role as a muse, its focus on Alexander limits its usefulness. Broader trends among artists of the period must be considered to explore the motivations behind the art Langtry was in.

Relations with Oscar Wilde

Eleanor Fitzsimons' book, *Wilde's Women: How Oscar Wilde Was Shaped by the Women He Knew*, is an essential resource for examining the relationship between

Langtry and Wilde and the mutual promotion and encouragement they offered one another. Wilde significantly contributed to Langtry's success through his unapologetic public support and promotion. Conversely, some may challenge this perspective, suggesting that Wilde's actions mirrored those of many men of his time, seeking to claim recognition for a woman's achievements.

Fitzsimons provides detailed accounts of pivotal moments in Langtry's life, including her arrival in London, which aligned with significant technological advancements in the printing industry. These developments enabled the widespread circulation of Langtry's image through newspapers and magazines, particularly the work of artists like Frank Miles (2015, p. 6).

Fitzsimons explores Langtry's role as a muse for Wilde, inspiring various characters and literary works, including Margaret Erlynne and over half a dozen sonnets, such as the renowned *Rose and Rue* (2015, p. 7).

In conclusion, Wilde's Women is valuable for analysing Langtry's relationships with artists and her influence as a muse. However, a notable limitation is that Langtry is not consistently referenced throughout the book, appearing only in specific chapters. This could result in a narrower perspective on her overall significance. Nonetheless, when Fitzsimons does address Langtry, she provides extensive detail and valuable context, making the book a critical resource when exploring Langtry's relationships and her role as a muse.

Jersey's Archive

An essential trip to Jersey led to a range of primary literature, which benefited my work and the argument I am striving to make. I was fortunate enough to uncover a range of private letters addressed to and from Langtry, including those addressed to lovers, friends, and struggling, ambitious artists.

Another suitable source was a magazine article titled '*Langtry Baby*' in which Langtry's granddaughter Mary Malcolm was interviewed by Douglas Keay exploring Langtry's life and her lasting impact on her relatives. Interestingly, Malcolm provides a critical and somewhat cynical perception of Langtry, which she blames on Langtry's poor relationship with Malcolm's mother, Jeanne. The family considered Langtry "hardly better than a prostitute" (Keay, 1978, p.42). Perspectives like Malcolm's will be essential to my thesis question, it compelled me to explore various perspectives on Langtry while finding points of agreement.

Visual Analysis

The Handbook of Visual Analysis by Theo Van Leeuwen and Carey Jewitt offers practical methodologies for critically analysing visual media and artefacts within cultural, social, and historical frameworks. The text examines various approaches, including semiotics and iconography, emphasising the importance of contextual awareness in visual analysis. As noted, "always keep in mind the context, the situation in which they were produced" (Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 123).

This concept is particularly relevant when examining the life and representation of figures such as Lillie Langtry through a feminist lens. Analysing her clothing and the sexualised nature of her brand advertisements raises critical questions, such as whether Langtry had the option to present herself in a less sexualised manner.

The book also analyses various media forms, including photographs and advertisements, essential tools for understanding Langtry's life. The authors highlight the idea that photography often conveys a sense of truth, rooted in the belief that "seeing is believing" and that it "draws on the ideology of the visible as evidence" (Kuhn, 1985, p. 27). However, the text cautions against taking images as the "truth", as many photographs are constructed and curated, as seen by the work of photographers such as Lafayette and his staged cabinet portraits of Langtry.

Worth and Lillie

The relationship between Charles Frederick Worth and Lillie Langtry was characterised by a mutually beneficial commercial partnership, as explored in Diana de Marly's book, *Father of Haute Couture: Worth*. Worth provided Langtry with costumes and dresses, which she would wear publicly, serving as an effective form of advertisement for his designs. According to de Marly, Langtry even wore Worth's creations during her widely publicised affair with royalty, reportedly wearing Worth's nightgowns to greet admirers because "they saved so much time in undressing" (de Marly, 1990, p. 148).

Chapter 11 of de Marly's book examines Worth's theatrical work for society's "leading ladies" and his "love for historical costume" (1990, p. 171), a passion evident in Langtry's stage costumes. For instance, in 1885, when Langtry performed as Lady Teazle in Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* at the Prince's Theatre, she insisted that "all her gowns should come from Monsieur Worth" (1990, p. 178). This highlights their professional relationship and reflects Langtry's admiration for Worth's craftsmanship and designs.

De Marly further explores their commercial collaboration, citing a spread in *The Queen* magazine dedicated to Langtry's wardrobe by Worth. A cartoon of Langtry upstaging the cast likely drew clients to Worth's atelier (1990, p. 178). In turn, Worth ensured that Langtry's face was always prominently displayed, recognising it as "part of her fortune" (de Marly, 1990, p. 179).

In conclusion, de Marly's book provides valuable insight into Worth and Langtry's relationship, illustrating how they mutually benefited from each other's promotion and influence.

Chapter 1- Lillie's Life

This chapter strives to explore the beginnings of Langtry's life, which helped set her up for her lifelong career, and the decisions she made, which led to her legacy as a beauty and Prince of Wales lover.

Neutral and critical perspectives are essential in biography writing. Theorist James Onley claims that the aim of writing a biography is not to convey facts but rather to present an attitude or perspective of a point of view on those facts (Onley, 1986). Therefore, this chapter should not be viewed as absolute truth. The biography had in-depth research, enabling a formed narrative of Lillie and her life and a thorough understanding of the thesis question. The reader must consider that this cannot be perceived as the factual truth as some sources or information have been lost from the late 18th century and early 19th.

To truly understand Langtry and the feminist tensions of Victorian and Edwardian celebrity culture, her life should be analysed and compared to feminist ideals while reflecting on her impact on consumption, the celebrity, and the muse.

The Sprouting Of The Lily 1853-1875

Born under the name Emilie Charlotte, Langtry had a unique upbringing compared to the other ladies of Jersey. Rather than the typical grooming to become a housewife with skills such as stitching and cooking, Emillie was provided with a different set of skills. Langtry recalls in her autobiography *The Days I Knew* that her Father, William Le Breton, the Dean of Jersey, felt it was important for her to be given the same upbringing as her six brothers, highlighting that from her youth she was destined not to have a 'simple' life. From a young age, she was taught to ride horses, which piqued her curiosity about the equestrian industry, something that would become prevalent later in life.

In 1874, Emillie Charlotte married Edward Langtry, a man with all his money from generational wealth. Langtry was led to believe that she would live a life of luxury and freedom off Jersey. Langtry's pursuit of wealth through marriage contrasts modern feminist ideals. However, her efforts to maintain this idealised lifestyle would not be achieved through her marriage with Edward Langtry, who had not been entirely honest about his financial difficulties. Langtry's final straw and frustration was when Edward had to sell Langtry's favourite boat, the "Red Gauntlet". Lillie told a reporter, "To become the mistress of the yacht, I married the owner" (Beatty, 1999); this certainly backfired on her.

Finally, in 1875, Langtry's aspiration to move to London happened alongside a hesitant Edward. Langtry claims her first London trip was with Edward. However,

Laura Beatty (1999, p.26) criticises Langtry as a partially unreliable source regarding the facade she puts on her life. Beatty highlights that Langtry first visited London with her Mother when she was 16, but it was a disaster as Langtry and her Mother were unaware of what was fashionable at the time and showed up in the wrong attire. Langtry was mocked and embarrassed; their trip was cut short, and Langtry failed to acknowledge it in her autobiography (Beatty, 1999). This early struggle in London, where Langtry faced ridicule and embarrassment, set the stage for the challenges she would later overcome.

The Langtrys stayed in Eaton Place, London, where her life and legacy were about to begin.

The Blossoming Of Lily

Shortly after Langtry arrived in London, she was struck with her “first deep grief” (Langtry, 1925, p.35) that her youngest and closest brother, Reggie, had passed away in a horse riding accident. Grieving, Lillie neglected her appearance, choosing to remain in constant mourning, wearing a “simple black, square-cut gown”. Langtry (1925, p.35) credits the gown to her Jersey modiste. Public mourning attire was often socially discouraged in the Victorian era. However, despite the disapproval, Lillie's decision to be in public mourning, steered her into gaining far more public attention than she previously had. This active rejection of societal standards marked Langtry’s turning point, revealing her resilience, as she used the societal norms to her advantage, realising that her appearance and clothing could raise her in society.

Whatever the motive, the outcome was unforeseen. After Langtry arrived at a social event in 1877, she was spotted by a range of artists and creatives: Frank Miles, John Millias and Oscar Wilde. Miles sketched her at this gathering, which quickly spread as it was put on postcards and sold and spread across the country. The image gained attention from the public and Prince Leopold who hung her portrait above his bed (Langtry, p.54) and was the brother of her future lover Prince Edward, who would later be a source of her societal position.

Millais requested to paint Langtry in her black gown and with her hair up, which became the 'Langtry knot' style, a hairstyle that continued to be worn years later. The painting not only solidified Langtry's position in society but also had a lasting impact on fashion. Evidence to support this claim is '*The Daily Express*' from 1925 in an article titled '*Curls and Long Hair Fashion*', which writes, “The long absent chignon, the Langtry knot, the pouffes and massed curls of the late Victorian days reappeared yesterday in a famous Hanover-square dress salon when the latest autumn fashions were presented” (Daily Express, 1925). Highlighting that nearly 40 years after the painting was presented to the public, Langtry's influence on fashion continued to be relevant and part of the 'latest fashions'.

John Millais’s portrait of Langtry, titled ‘*The Jersey Lily*’ (Fig. 2), is named after the sitter's island and her celebrity name. The poise and elegance seen in Langtry are relevant to the expectations towards women of the time, and viewers appreciated this: "The Jersey Lily does not exactly stoop; her shoulders are perfectly straight"

(Blairgowrie Advertiser, 1889, p.4). Millais was passionate about his muse holding a lily, so Langtry held a sprig of Guernsey lilies, native to Jersey. It can be suggested through the work of Springer (1985) that Millais wanted not just the lily but Langtry herself to be portrayed as a "fragile beauty" (1985, p.1). The painting embodies the Victorian man's gaze, a concept explored in Laura Mulvey's (1975, p.11) work: "gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly". To be perceived as "pure" and "obedient" were traits men aspired for their future wives to have. Langtry's Jersey Lily facade protected her from the potential backlash that many of her actions would have faced if she were a regular woman.

The painting's reception was successful and full of great press. The *Penny Illustrated paper* (1879, p.10) tributes the painting and the sitter questioning "what Londoner has not been privileged to refresh his eyes with the captivating beauty of Mrs Langtry, The Jersey Lily", highlighting the extent of the audience who saw the painting. The progression of the printing press certainly enabled widespread attention to Langtry and her work, with prints of 'The Jersey Lily' being put into newspapers.

Figure 2:
Everett Millais, J.
(1878).
A Jersey Lily. [Painting]

A Royal Favour

Langtry captivated men nationwide. On the 19th May 1877, Langtry's arrival was reported in *Vanity Fair* (1877), stating, "All male London is going wild about the Beautiful Lady who has come to us from the Channel Islands". Once settled into London, Langtry went to a dinner party hosted by Sir Allen Young, which would change her life. This is where she met Edward Prince of Wales. In her memoir, she recalls how she attempted familiarity (Langtry, 1925), which would appeal to Prince Edward.

Baumeister and Vohns's concept of "sexual economics" will be crucial when studying the relationship between Lillie Langtry and the Prince of Wales. Sexual economics is the idea that a woman will sleep with a man and receive a kind of resource in return. This resource can vary depending on the circumstances, but in Langtry's circumstances, the resource was a place in society (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). A woman using affairs for status challenges traditional feminism. However, they should consider the circumstances in which Langtry was living and the limited opportunities women had to become independent.

Royal affairs were not unheard of throughout history; the King or Prince in the relationship had free reign to sleep with whomever he wished with no consequences. These affairs were not explicitly written about; instead, reports would use euphemistic language, as seen in *London and Provincial Entr'acte,* which stated, "Mrs. Langtry entertaining the Prince of Wales at supper, it looks as though

the championing of the actor were a work of supererogation" (London and Provincial Entr'acte, 1885, p.4). However, throughout history, the mistresses in these relationships have often been vilified in the public eye. De La Haye and Valerie claim that “In 1878 the Prince secured Lillie’s entrance into the upper echelons of British society by arranging her to be presented at court” (2014, p.129). Queen Victoria allowed this, something unheard of for a mistress but also someone who was not truly a part of the aristocracy.

Social Elevation & Career Boosts Provided by The Prince:

Their relationship enabled Langtry to climb the social ladder of Victorian society. Intersectionality, as a critical social theory explored by Patricia Collins, encouraged my thoughts about Langtry's identity as a woman and how that crossed with her relationship with Edward and social status. Intersectionality explores the idea that one has not just one identity but different characteristics from different sections of life. "Intersectionality theorises that social identities do not function independently; rather, they function as an interconnected system, each contributing to how one experiences social life" (Collins, 2000, p.59). This concept is crucial in understanding how Langtry used all the resources she encountered in the patriarchal society to live a somewhat secure lifestyle. Although Langtry was a woman, she used her gender to her advantage, resulting in her relationship with Prince Edward, which enabled her to receive high status and wealth. For example,

through Langtry's relationship with Edward, she met Henry Irving, a successful actor who would become a long-term friend and help her find work.

Being with the King ensured invitations to many social events, particularly those hosted by the Marlborough House Set, Edward's closest friend group. Being an associate of the royal family was a true accomplishment; in the 19th century, they were at the top of the social pyramid. Unlike today, where celebrities and politicians frequently interact with the royal family, an invitation to a royal event signified full acceptance into upper society. Theo Aronson (1988) explored that being invited to a royal residence meant that you were a member of society. Appearing at these very public events ensured Langtry could network with those of high society, self-promoting herself and future shows she would be part of.

Langtry recalls her second season at the royal court when she was presented to Queen Victoria and how she creatively found a way of making the focus go on her through her fashion. Langtry understood that in society, a woman's fashion was essential to remaining relevant and in the news. She described her "ivory brocade gown" as "Which hung in the style of Josephine" (1925, p.92), but it was instead Langtry's choice of accessories that called for attention. It was the white ostrich feathers placed on her head, something "the Queen had recently expressed her disapproval of tiny feathers which women would wear to these occasions" (1925, p.92). Langtry likely knew she would be the only woman bold enough to wear feathers, highlighting her subtle disruptions to societal expectations.

Edward’s support towards Langtry was undoubtedly one of the essential reasons she had a successful stage career. The publicity of their relationship drew influential and successful aristocrats from across the country to witness the Jersey Lily on stage.

How Their Relationship Impacted Langtry’s Wealth;

A royal affair, of course, results in gifts of clothing, jewels and even housing. Whilst many gifts were received, the most timeless piece is still relevant to society and pop culture today. Langtry wore this necklace (seen in Fig.2) on stage as Cleopatra in 1881. The Prince of Wales commissioned Hancocks, London, to create a stage-worthy necklace which would fit her role. Designed with Egyptian motifs and styles in mind, the necklace is centred with a winged scarab, known for symbolising rebirth and protection (Blakeley, 2023). The coral-beaded chain is covered in tassels embellished with more scarabs, ram heads and stones. Hancocks fulfilled the royal's request, and the necklace's craftsmanship is a perfect example of 19th-century techniques (Watson, 2024). The use of Langtry's necklace in *The Devil Wears Prada,* worn by Meryl Streep in 2006 (Fig.3), indicates Langtry's everlasting social relevance and style. In 2024, Hancocks revived the Egyptian-inspired necklace as a promotion with the film's stage adaptation and had the Langtry necklace on display for the public to see. Reviving interest in Langtry 143 years later.

Although their romantic relationship did not last beyond 1885, they continued to be close friends and would send encouragement and support to one another. Edward's support brought publicity and, consequently, money to Lillie's shows.

Figure 3:
Hancocks ‘Lillie Langtry’ necklace commissioned by Edward VI.
(1882)

Figure 4:
Streep wearing the same necklace intended for Langtry
The Devil Wears Prada (2006)

Bringing out Lillie's Wilde side

Langtry and Wilde's complex friendship was filled with admiration and creativity. Although they both adored one another, it is clear that Wilde was far more infatuated with the friendship than Lillie was. Wilde (1882) describes her in a letter, finding her as beautiful as the Gods: "Pure Greek it is, with the grave low forehead, exquisitely arched brow; the noble chiselling of the mouth". For Wilde, Langtry was a Muse inspiring half a dozen sonnets and different characters in his books and plays. His public admiration for Langtry's beauty and acting led to the Punch stating, "Mr Oscar Wilde, who fainted with ecstasy, was carried out by attendants" (1881, p.309) during Langtry's role in Macbeth.

Should the concept of the muse be seen as something that empowered Langtry and enabled her to reach and develop her financial independence? Alternatively, something that objectifies her and creates new beauty standards for women of the time to attempt to appeal to. John Berger's theories that the muse is an object of the gaze criticise how artists position women as objects rather than creators, and that they should consider and appreciate that without their muse, there would be no art. According to Berger (2008, p.25), "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at". Although Langtry was a muse to Wilde and other artists, she also took the initiative to shape her public image through public appearances, relationships and endorsements. Langtry used objectification to her advantage. In Victorian society, women did not have the opportunity to object to this without facing fierce public backlash and likely having

the *Punch* articles written about them. So, she did what she could with the limited tools she and other women of that time had. Langtry acted in the plays written directly for her, and she posed for painters and photographers who wanted to create her portrait. By doing this, she could make an income and support herself without eventually having to be dependent on a man.

Langtry's being financially independent can be seen as an act of feminism at the time, as her financial independence would have inspired those who had not reached it. For instance, the *San Francisco Call* (1889, p.21) wrote an article all about “How Your Favourite Actresses Save Their Money”*,* providing the reader with insight into how she can make a living through her various endeavours. The article describes her: "The most conspicuous example of business acuteness, shrewdness, daring and apparent luck in investment among the women on stage is personified by Mrs. Lillie Langtry". One could argue that the act of being involved in an article is not enough to be an act of feminism. Nevertheless, I would disagree; the fact that women would have been inspired to create a form of income that they would not have thought was possible is an act of feminism.

Forms of income

Wilde encouraged Langtry to use her beauty and join the stage to get out of the enormous debt she and her husband had got into. Tracy Davis (1991, p.69) explores how actresses were often seen as no better than prostitutes: "She consented to be 'hired' for amusement by all who could command the price", highlighting that

choosing this route could have forced Langtry to swallow her pride in the hopes that she would be financially independent. Langtry had to capitalise on her beauty and facade of the *Jersey Lily* to have a successful career rather than remain a passive socialite. This ‘character’ created around Langtry led many people to come to her shows to witness the beauty of the lily rather than her talent, which she claims she did not have. An 1882 review of her play *An Unequal Match* states, "this success is due more to her heralded fame as a 'Society' beauty than to her excellence as an actress" (The Smoking Room, 1882, p.1).

So, was her choice to be an actress a feminist act or a commodified spectacle? Langtry embodies Judith Butler's theory of Gender Performativity as a "strategy of survival within compulsory systems" (2006, p.190). She chose this method over directly challenging patriarchy. This somewhat submissive approach led to Langtry passively challenging this biased society but eventually succeeding. The approach does contradict a traditional feminist approach as she built her career on male desire; however, with limited career opportunities for women, this was the most suitable for her.

Overall, Langtry's stage career was an act of defiance of societal expectations towards women, acting when she was no longer youthful and purchasing her own homes and successful racehorses. She used the structure of society to her advantage, enabling her to reach financial independence. Langtry's stage career freed her from aristocratic dependence, proving that women could build wealth and

success outside marriage. Unlike other actresses who relied on male patrons, Langtry owned her earnings and invested in businesses, making her an early example of a self-sufficient woman in the theatre industry. Although this thesis does argue that her career was an act of feminism, one should consider that although Langtry was able to shape her image, she remained an object of consumption and male desire.

As stated, Langtry took the initiative to use her earnings to make suitable investments. Evidence for this includes her successful career in the horse racing industry, writing, "I cannot recall all the races he ran in or won, but the Jockey Club Cup, Goodwood Cup and Ascot Gold cup all shine at me from my sideboard, all inscribed with the very gallant name of my horse" (1925, p.257). With her being on the front page of the *Sketch* photographed by Lafayette for the Races, she became a face for the industry. Figure 5 shows Langtry photographed on the cover of the *Sketch*. Her investments are credited in newspaper articles: "She invested largely in flat property in the tenement district of New York, which is said to have increased in value within the last few years" (Materson, 1889, p.21). Alongside her mining properties in Nevada, Langtry "located some mines in the vicinity of Carson about ten or twelve years ago" and "will return to Nevada during the coming year and develop her properties". Langtry was not just a beauty; she used the system to her advantage. They appealed to the male gaze as they were the ones who would pay to see her, but little did they know that Langtry was taking advantage and eventually

investing in all her other independent companies and ventures. Her defiance of norms was and remains inspiring.

After years of travelling across Europe and the U.S., Langtry resided in her Monaco Villa, passing away in 1929 due to pneumonia. The next chapter will break down Langtry's lifestyle choices related to fashion and beauty and the impact which she had on them.

Figure 5:
Lillie Langtry on front cover of Sketch Newspaper by Lafayette (1889)

Chapter 2- Fashion & Beauty

From the beginning of her career, it was apparent that fashion and beauty were key to maintaining social and long-term relevance. Her public image had great agency, and Langtry was active in keeping it engaging through art, fashion choices, shows, and photography. Through primary and secondary sources, this chapter will explore whether she used fashion and beauty to empower herself or if they objectified her crafted persona.

The Collaboration Between Lillie Langtry & Charles Worth

The house of Worth was mainly responsible for Langtry's theatre attire and much of her wardrobe. Their friendship was also a business arrangement. Worth relied on models and high society women, seen in his attire as an advertisement. However, Langtry was unique compared to others as she was both a performer and socialite. Her gowns symbolised elegance, exclusivity, and conspicuous consumption. Thorstein Veblen's theories on conspicuous consumption that certain clothing choices signal the consumer's desired social status: "Conspicuous consumption of valuable goods is a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure" (1999, p.36). Chantal Trubert-Tollu *et al*. (2017) credits Worth and Bobergh with the idea of using ladies in the public eye to help promote the garments, "Through their social position, their beauty or their celebrity, these ladies attracted attention" (1999, p.36)

Figure 6 shows Lillie Langtry photographed by Lafayette in 1889 in a Worth gown. Made as a costume for Langtry in her role in *The Degenerates,* the gown has intricate lace and embroidery, with floral details covering the gown and some artificial props placed by Langtry. Again, this links to Springer's (1985) concept of the muse being too fragile beauty, a common concept repetitively perceived throughout Langtry's life. Seen through her pearl necklace, Lillie's 'purity' enhances her appeal to the male gaze. The portrait was photographed before the show's performance to attract more audiences. It showed the beautiful Worth gown that the female audience would appeal to and lying seductively on the chaise longue in an attempt to bring more men. Figure 7 shows Langtry's gown next to another Worth gown from the Met Museum, which, although not identical, has many similarities. With such limited surviving garments of Langtrys, it is essential to use what objects are around to see how they can be incorporated. Both gowns have this velvet flower pattern with a silk base on the gown with a long train, topped with beautiful and intricate jewelled details at the shoulders of the gown. The main difference between both garments is the chest area. With Langtrys, the silk and velvet cover her chest with a layering of the jewels over her breast, bringing the male spectators to gaze towards that area. The other gown has a lower-cut, but more bejewelled. Daisy May (1899, p.16) praises her gowns "as the strikingly decollete bodices in vogue. One remarkable for its charming elegance is of white brocade, a favourite material for evening wear".

Figure 6:
Lillie Langtry in Worth gown
Photographed by Lafayette
(1889)

Figure 7:
{Left} Lillie Langtry in Worth dress photographed (1889)
{Right} Worth dress with similar details (1898-1900)

According to The House of Worth, Worth specialised in selecting "rich velvets" for Lillie Langtry. Dark and rich velvets symbolise wealth and style, and although velvet became easier to create due to the Industrial Revolution, manufacturers aimed to maintain its everlasting sense of luxury that radiated from it (Art Institute Chicago, 2016).

She recalled many occasions when she wore his attire outside the theatre. It might seem she wore his clothes off-duty, but that was not quite true. Whenever she appeared in public as the Jersey Lily, she was still working on selling the allure, embodying the character she had spent years crafting. Langtry's adornment towards Worth's designs is highlighted when she recalls a drink being spilt on her blue Worth gown, only to go upstairs and change into a pink gown by Worth. She joyfully recalls that when a gown suited her well, Worth would tell her, "Ave half a dozen in different colours" (1925, p.215). Langtry's decision to purchase multiple versions of the same gown reinforces how fashion functioned as a strategy for maintaining elite status, which applies to Pierre Bourdieus' concept of Cultural Capital. The concept is that products bought signify social status (Bourdieu, p.XVIII), and people buy Worth gowns to appear as part of high society. De Marly states that the actress craved Worth's approval of their appearance, the same amount they would crave approval from royalty (1980, p.172).

Langtry & Other Fashion Houses

Alongside The House of Worth, Langtry also formed mutually beneficial alliances with other fashion houses, such as Lucile. Langtry was among the first celebrities to promote fashion houses by wearing their designs. Church-Gibson argues that only in recent years have fans been more interested in actors' attire out of work (2012, p.53), but Langtry's case proves otherwise. During Langtry's height of fame in 1870-the 90s, the sole reason behind using Langtry was the public's fascination with her fashion. Vogue (1931, p.25) wrote an article crediting her for being the inspiration behind a range of trends: "Her photographs were bought in thousands; in imitation of her, hair was worn in a Grecian bun, figures were encased to be the same shape as hers".

Langtry's fashion choices were calculated to enhance her celebrity status. Unlike Worth, Lucile was more open to her audience. Langtry collaborated with various brands to reach a broader social spectrum. Langtry understood the importance of commercialisation and adapted accordingly.

Langtry had a long-term alliance with the fashion house Lucile. Lucile credits Langtry as her first live muse, inspiring a gown for a dance (Bigham, 2012). Lucile recalls the dress: "It was in black velvet...which fell in soft folds to the feet, and there was a little tight bodice finished with a deep belt" (2012, p.23). Entwistle explores fashion's dual nature: empowering yet restrictive. Linking to being a muse

to Lucile, Langtry inspired her to make a dress with a corset, ensuring constriction for whoever wears it- not embodying freedom and empowerment.

Lucile capitalised on appearances by Langtry and other celebrities, such as Ellen Terry, to gain attention towards her fashion shows. Days after the shows, newspapers raved about the production and attendees. Lucile's gowns were known to have been able to "depict the personality" of the client (Bigham, 2012). In 1911, Lucile began naming dresses more suggestively, such as "Incessant Soft Desire" (New York Evening World, 1904). This form of marketing attracted celebrities like Langtry to her designs.

Another fashion house that would have relied on cultural capital to sell products was Maison Lewis. Although there are minimal details, a fashion shoot was taken in May 1911 by Bassano Ltd., including a selection of portraits of Langtry wearing extravagant Maison Lewis hats (Fig. 8). The photographs highlight the typical style of hat that was popular then (Rolley, K, 1992). Rolley states that the mass of bird feathers decorating the tops of the hats was extremely popular; this is seen in Figure 9, showing a 1911 feathered hat designed by Paquin. Since the style was so popular, brands had to ensure their hats stood out; hence, using a famous actress and beauty such as Langtry would have heightened the number of possible clients to view Maison Lewis' designs over the many competitors. That same year, Maison Lewis had shoots with many other models with these extravagant hats. Therefore, although no written proof exists, this suggests Maison Lewis worked with Bassano

Ltd and likely paid Langtry for promotion, Langtry was likely to have been paid by Maison to model their designs.

Langtry is a clear example of a celebrity who has been strategically branded. She understood her main audience, the upper class, and shifted to more fluid brands later in her career. Langtry monopolised her public image and ensured a future for celebrity branding.

Figure 8:
Bassano Ltd.
Lillie Langtry wearing Maison Lewis
(1899)

Figure 9:
Paquin Jeanne
Summer Day dress and fur bordered coat with large black feathered hat.
(1910)

Image & Commercial Endorsements

Langtry was one of the first beauty product endorsers, a technique still used today. By analysing these advertisements and their impacts, we will conclude whether the involvement is empowerment and a way of her financial freedom or if she harmed feminism and women's progress in society.

Langtry's most notable early partnership was with Pears Soap, an endorsement that made up 40% of all the archived articles I could locate, underscoring how central the image was. She was the first celebrity product endorser in 1882, though the marketing sold not soap but her lifestyle; "Since using Pears soap, I have discarded all others" (Pears, 1887). Baudrillard explores this idea of purchasing a lifestyle, stating, "We consume the product through the product itself, but we consume its meaning through advertising" (2020, p.114). Pears used her signature and image, which they had legally acquired; It was rumoured by multiple sources that they "paid by weight". Langtry was paid £132 in 1882, equivalent to around £20,000 in 2025. Afterwards, Pears was granted legal rights to use her image, signature, and statements, as seen in Figure 10.

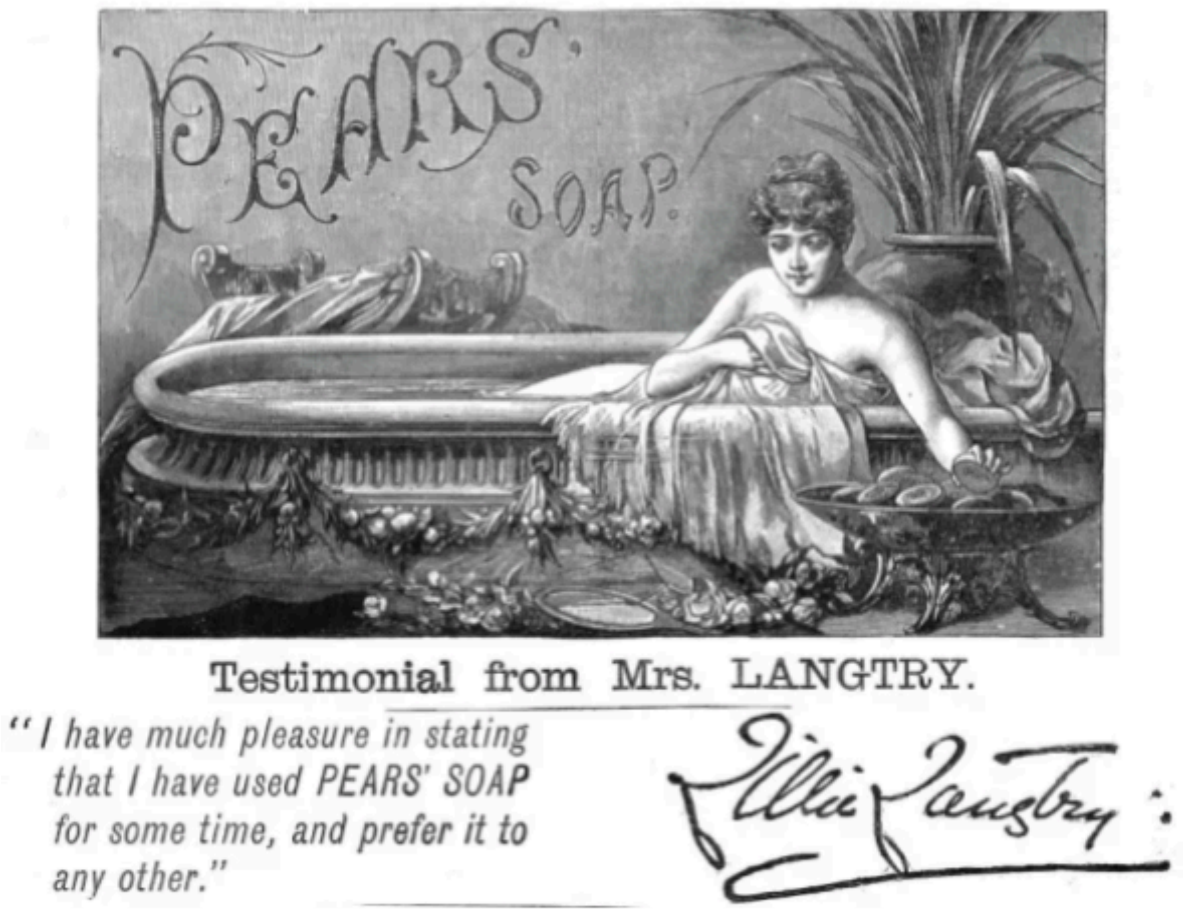

Figure 10:
Pears Soap; Promoted by Lillie Langtry
(1890)

Although specific figures are scarce after Langtry's endorsements and Pears' great efforts in advertisements, the company's annual income increased and ranged from £70,000- £100,000 annually (Pittwater, 2017). This partnership shaped and changed the marketing industry. Being highly responsible for constructing her pure and clean image, appealing to the male gaze. In modern society, products enforcing male-defined beauty standards challenge feminist ideals. Likewise, those who promote the idea that women should appeal to this gaze are reinforcing patriarchal ideals rather than challenging them. However, given the limited opportunities of the time, Langtry could not refuse £132. Though the suffragette movement was growing, feminism as we know it was not yet defined; it is important to recognize that feminism, as a defined and widely understood ideology, did not exist in the same form we understand today. Mehta explores the idea through Naomi Wolf's "The Beauty Myth" that "Women are the ones who are scrutinised while men are both doers and observers. The 'rules' made by society state that attractiveness is a requirement for desirable ladies" (2022, p.29). Men are the ones behind the promotional decisions of brands and the ideal the Langtry's persona enforces on late Victorian and early Edwardian women.

Langtry's involvement in the beauty industry positioned women as both consumers and commodities under capitalism. The products she endorsed and promoted installed female ideals that appealed to men. Figure 11 shows a makeup product named *'Lillie Powder'*, a product made by Clarkson Williams "For Improving & Beautifying the Complexion". The product suggests that women need to improve

and look like the Jersey Lily. The product also had the famous Langtry signature, implying she had signed the rights away to Clarksons in a similar agreement with Pears.

Langtry's endorsement of these beauty products enforced the idea that women had to perform to appeal to society's men and remain youthful. This can link to Butler's theory on gender performativity: the pure female gender is a performance: "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts" (2006, p.190). Linking to the premise of this thesis Langtry's encouragement that women should look a certain way is not what a modern feminist would agree with. However, her forming and income through these endorsements is an act of feminism for her time.

Figure 11:
Box of 'Lillie Langtry' face powder
(20th.c)

Ageing, Fashion, and the Limits Of The Muse

Central to the Jersey Lily persona was her youth and vitality, so the question becomes, what happens to the muse when they age?

Lillie, like other women, faced age-related misogyny. In the end, many saw her as undesirable, a withering lily. T.P O'Connor (1929) cruelly wrote for all the public to observe that Langtry now appeared "dead-worn out like a garment before its owner". Langtry's life shows how society discards women once they defy its ideals. Mulvey (1975) explores how, in the media, women are viewed as objects of male desire and when they are no longer ‘desirable’, the media world has no value for them.

Her career slowed by the turn of the century, but Langtry could still find work for being a beauty right until the end; there were far fewer opportunities than she had. She challenged the notion that older women lacked value. For forms of income, acting was her primary source. In 1913, Langtry took part in *His Neighbours Wife,* a silent film which was a massive success in the *U.S. The Daily Sentinel* (1914) claims, "Mrs Langtry is known to every lover of drama. Some of her roles are household words, and in no other play did she receive such tremendous success". Langtry remained successful and financially independent, using the money she earned to purchase her house, which she resided in Monaco until her death. Langtry did not fight her disappearance in the limelight; by 1929, she had been replaced with a new generation of beauties.

Although evidence of her fashion partnerships at the turn of the century is limited, Langtry still participated in beauty campaigns to prevent ageing. Once again, the media highlighted that ageing must be postponed to be seen as beautiful; you must be youthful to be desirable as a woman. Langtry was involved in a newspaper article titled '*How To Be Beautiful At Fifty'.* Unlike opposing articles, this one praised Langtry for defying ageing: "She is a woman who defies time and dares health" (Liverpool Evening Express, 1903). However, Langtry's reasoning for not ageing is false and the opposite of empowering. She claimed, "I never dare to handle money, not a shilling or a five-cent piece for money is the root of all worry. Thus, I keep young". Through contextual analysis, we can tell this is incorrect because, at this time, she owned businesses and successful racehorses. Why did Langtry provide this advice? It is likely that the newspaper company, run by men, wanted Langtry to influence women not to get involved in finance out of the fear that women might realise they could live independently.

Langtry challenged patriarchal views on ageing actresses. Unlike male actors, female actresses rarely continued acting after they no longer were "glamorous", and the "termination of an actress's career seemed to have more to do with her age" (Davis, 1990, p.52). When an actress was "undesirable", she was scrapped. However, Langtry overcame this commonality, continuing to act and model until she died in 1929 at 75. Figure 12 shows a haunting portrait of 74-year-old Langtry by Cecil Beaton. The bright lilies contrast with her dark satin or velvet dress. With

context in mind, the lilies symbolise mourning, once used to represent youth and purity at the beginning of her career. Now symbolising her impending death. Cecil Beaton (2003) had previously spoken poorly of older women as if they are no longer desirable evidently, so when he described Greta Garbo when she was 65 years old, "I was appalled how destroyed her skin has become, covered with wrinkles, double chins". Therefore, his decision to photograph her was particularly notable; perhaps Langtry was still given credit by the creatives as they understood what she had done for the entire media industry.

In summary, Chapter 2 analysed the main sources of Langtry's income through her career as a 'Beauty', through the analysis of brand partnerships and how she used fashion as a tool of elevation in her career. This leads to the next chapter, which explores how Langtry used her elevated position in society differently from her contemporary, Ellen Terry.

Figure 12:
Lillie Langtry
Photographed by Cecil Beaton
(1928)

Chapter 3- Case Study

This chapter examines Lillie Langtry and her contemporary Ellen Terry, who was a stage actress during the same period as Langtry. Both actresses were on different sides of the spectrum; Langtry was known primarily for her beauty on stage, whilst Terry was revered for her sheer talent. This chapter will explore fame, feminist agency, and costume while also examining their respective places in celebrity culture.

Langtry embodied celebrity culture and commodification, while Terry took a considerably more subtle approach to life. Both were able to tackle the constraints of a patriarchal society but in very different ways. This exploration will compare their lives and feminist impacts.

Public Appearance

Although both women progressed in their careers, they arrived via quite different paths. As previously explored, much of Langtry's journey to the stage came from her notoriety and famous affairs. Langtry was the 'beauty' audiences felt ‘fortunate’ to see.

Conversely, Terry had displayed an exceptional natural talent for acting from a young age, debuting at 9 in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale.* While Langtry's fame stemmed largely from her beauty, Terry was celebrated for her genuine acting talent, being considered the “greatest of all English actresses” (Shearer, 1998, p.1). Terry's

ability to embody her roles and to vanish into character whilst she performed was astounding. In 1880, *The Illustrated London Newspaper* reviewed her role as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice,* declaring "Miss Terry rightly throws her whole soul into the delivery of these lines. She has appreciated the opportunity for intellectual acting" (1880, p.10).

A study of such reviews highlights how both of their celebrity personas were constructed around different factors: Langtry's was more generally appealing to the male gaze, whilst Terry's was more centred around her acting ability and overall intellect, yet both thrived in different versions of fame and faced patriarchal struggles in similar ways. Their methods of facing the inherent challenges were often quite similar to one another.

Costumes & Aesthetic

Both actresses wore differing stage costumes.

Langtry blurred the lines between herself and her roles, reinforcing the Jersey Lily persona. Terry's costumes were more historically accurate for whichever period she was working within, deliberately separating the actor from the character. Costume interpretations were usually the work of the designers; Langtry's costumes were often created by the House of Worth as advertisements, highlighting his designs and lifestyle, whereas Terry's were more historical costumes, created by Alice Comyns-Carr with Adaline Nettleship.

Lillie Langtry on Stage:

As Langtry’s career progressed so did the designers of her costumes, starting with unknown designers to later on in her success progressing to designers such as Worth.

Langtry’s stunning costume for Cleopatra was credited in the show's brochure (Royal Princess Theatre, 1890) to have been made by four different people, none culturally known dressmakers, and the show's wigs were credited to Clarksons, the theatre's prominent supplier. Unfortunately, the Cleopatra costume garments have not survived. However, the rhinestone bra and belt buckle are seen in Figure 13, alongside a photograph of her wearing them photographed by Henry Van der Weyde. According to Bridgets Cabinets (2024), "the set was made out of various sizes of silver crystal rhinestones" and remains in perfect condition, having had only one owner since Langtry. To remain in such perfect condition for an extended period of time highlights the care and quality of the jewels that have stayed. The detailed jewels within Langtry’s Cleopatra costume were designed to dazzle even those sitting at the very back of the theatre.

Figure 13:
{Top} 1890s Stage costume worn by Lillie Langtry
{Bottom} Photograph of Langtry in costume by Henry Van der Weyde (1890)

Many of her costumes unashamedly appealed to the male gaze, feeding into her consumable image. For example, her costume in *She Stoops to Conquer*, designed by Worth, for example fitted the many standards put on women in 1881, particularly her tightly corseted waist. Through this idealised appearance, she was enacting a version of femininity that appealed to male approval and apparent desire; de Marly's work brings attention to the fact that her costumes and appearance were likely a big part of the whole theatre experience. Many reviews praised Langtry and the "magnificent dresses" (Birmingham Mail, 1882, p.3). The article also highlighted how Langtry wished to be independent in carving out her theatrical success, "determined to organise a company and tour on her own account". This article hints at the ambition that eventually led to her becoming a theatre manager in 1900.

Worth designed Langtry's costume for *A Society Butterfly* (1894) (Recklies, p.47). It portrayed Langtry as Aphrodite, a Greek Goddess fitting for Langtry as her appearance was often compared to that of a Greek Goddess throughout her career. Figure 14 shows a page of her in the Sketch photographed by Downey. Artists were intrigued by the idea of escapism and aesthetic dress. The silhouette mirrors that of Greek drapery through its flowing silk; as Langtry would go across the stage, the dress would drape behind her, enhancing her ‘Godlike’ appearance on stage for the audience.

Figure 14
Langtry as Aphrodite in "A Society Butterfly"
Photographed by Downey
(1894)

The House of Worth loved to create a historical costume, although, in Langtry's case, they also employed many considerations specific to the actor. For example, Worth made her Marie Antoinette costumes, but it cannot be claimed that they were remarkably historically accurate. De Marly explains that it was traditional in theatre for the main character (or the 'star' of the show) to have custom-made attire, and the rest of the cast would wear what was in the stock room, explaining that the star performers insisted on wearing the "height of luxurious fashion"(1999, p.171).

Her Marie Antoinette costume, credited in the *Theatre Royal programme* as "Mrs. Langtry dresses by M. Worth of Paris" (1901, p.3), highlights their equally beneficial alliance. She wore these gowns, and Worth was given credit in the reviews for designing them. These extravagant costumes would often shield Langtry from poor reviews. *The Evening Irish Times* (1901) reviewed: "The costumes are beyond all praise, so perfect and so artistic they cover a multitude of serious faults", suggesting that the crowd only truly enjoyed the play due to the costume qualities rather than the play; "applause was intended for the style of production rather than the piece itself" these type of reviews shielded Langtry by shifting the reader's attention to the costumes and set design. Such reviews likely embarrassed Langtry. The review could be the reason why she fails to explore the role of Antoinette in her biography.

Langtry's collaboration and her likely insistence on stage costumes that matched or exceeded contemporary high fashion can be explored through McRobbie's (2004)

idea of post-feminism as power. While she operated within patriarchal norms, she also had some control or input into her image, capitalised on her beauty, and built a successful career. Her elaborate costumes were integral to her brand, helping her to strive towards secure financial independence.

Ellen Terry on stage:

Ellen Terry's costumes were considerably more historically accurate and would often contain great details and symbolism within them. Her surviving costumes remain in excellent condition and are on public display. This contrasts with Langtry's costume legacy, given that many of her costumes have not survived - merely the descriptions of how magnificent she looked.

Terry’s acting style ensured she consumed the character, further enhanced by the careful costume detail and historical accuracy. In effect, an audience didn't see Terry, they saw instead whomever she was playing. On the contrary, Langtry's costumes tended to enhance her beauty and the ideals she reflected; you saw Lillie Langtry on stage more so than whom she was portraying.

Terry, raised in a creative family, had acted since childhood. She worked closely with costume designers like Alice Comyns-Carr, developing looks and images that communicated symbolism and helped audiences engage with still deeper meanings behind her characters.

Langtry and Terry portrayed Lady Macbeth at different points in their careers, and their costumes and performances received very different receptions.

Terry's 1888 performance at the Lyceum Theatre in London became legendary in the theatre world and was said to be one of the best performances of her career. Alongside this, her costume was incredible and truly embodied what it was to be a villain with so much representative detail entwined into it. Titled *The Beetle Wing Dress,* designer Alice Comynss-Carr provided insight into the different elements of the dress, "I was anxious to make this particular dress look as much like soft chain armour as I could, and yet have something that would give the appearance of the scales of a serpent" (1926, cited in Isaac, 2024). A serpent was chosen because Lady Macbeth was dangerous and perceived as a snake whispering plans into Macbeth's ears. Terry was able to distance herself from the character and was often said to be a kind actress. Lady Macbeth, though, was anything but generous. Terry (1888) dismissed soft portrayals, writing: "I by no means make her a 'gentle, lovable woman' as some of 'em say. I have to what is vulgarly called 'sweat at it,' each night", thus highlighting the separation between herself and the character. However, her costume was extravagant and one which was greatly admired. It didn't divert attention from the talent that she accessed on stage but succeeded in adding depth to her portrayal rather than attempting to focus on her beauty. There were in-depth descriptions and accounts of the appearance of the dress, and it is sure to continue being acknowledged as great costume art as it continues to be displayed at shows or exhibitions managed by the likes of the National Trust.

Lillie Langtry's performance and interpretation of Lady Macbeth took place a year later, in 1889; Langtry's performance had much to live up to, given Terry's rave reviews. However, neither her talent nor costume earned Terry's praise. The press did not love either her costume or acting. "Mrs. Langtry is not the Lady Macbeth of any stage. She is in the crown and mantle of Lady Macbeth, as in the furs of Lina Despard or the white muslin of Pauline, what she always has been....she has not one gleam of dramatic fire" (London and Provincial Entr'acte, 1889).

Overall, the consensus was that Langtry's theatrical performance lacked intensity and depth compared to Terry's truly psychological embodiment.

Compared to Terry's costume, Langtry's, both seen in Figure 15, was poorly considered by her advisors and possibly herself too. Langtry's overall performance and appearance failed to adequately transform her into a character. The audience still saw a Lillie Langtry performance and not the fully-formed personification of Lady Macbeth. Her costume did not help her merge into the role. This links back to John Berger's (1972) ideas of objectification: Langtry was still being looked at rather than seen as an artistic subject. Her visual spectacle consumed her performance in many ways, reducing it to aesthetics rather than genuine artistic interpretation.

Figure 15:
{Left} Ellen Terry Lady Macbeth costume (1888)
{Right} Lillie Langtry as Lady Macbeth (1889)

Fame and their feminist legacies

Langtry and Terry embodied feminist agency in distinct ways. Both women found their routes to assert control and independence within their patriarchal society via fame and personas. Both were able to navigate society but through different strategies. As previously explored, they both worked to create their own defined images in society, one as an admired, well-connected and famous beauty, the other as a talented actress. By examining how they both took part in feminist agency, this thesis will be able to establish how they did so.

Both actresses were on par with going against societal ideals towards childbearing, with them both having illegitimate children. Jeanne Langtry's father is rumoured to be Prince Louis of Battenberg, Prince Leopold or Arthur Jones. Although we will likely never know the truth, the illegitimacy of her birth caused a rift between Langtry and her daughter, and the night before her wedding Jeanne’s concerns were confirmed, their relationship wouldn't be the same leading to the generational disdain towards her explored in Keay’s article (Beatty, p.304). Terry's illegitimate children, on the other hand, the father is known as Edward Goodwin, a pioneer of the Aesthetic movement and architecture (Fitzsimons, p.90). Their relationship helped forge the bohemian facade of Terry's life, after their romantic endeavours ended they remain great partners.

Langtry commodified her image to achieve financial independence, but to do this, she had to abide by the male gaze and appeal to it. She understood that she had to

lean into her visual appeal and fame, commodifying herself to gain income and explore a path of subtle feminism. Through branding and endorsements, Langtry commodified her image to commodify herself and become this well-known *Jersey Lily* beauty. Hers was the starting point of what we often see in influencers promoting products in 2025. Linking back to Mulvey, Langtry's stage career revolved around the male gaze. Throughout her career, she would have been unable to escape the speculation that, as an actress, she had "consented to be hired for amusement by all those who could command the price" (Davis, 1991, p.69) and, therefore, perceived as many an observer's object. Pertinently, Davis highlighted the fear that Langtry and even Terry would, in time, face the ‘New Woman’, the impending fear of being replaced by a younger actress.

Lillie had economic agency, but this was within patriarchal structures. She worked within the structure set around her to gain independence and finance. She did not openly object to society, but her financial endeavours alongside the theatre highlighted feminist agency.

Terry chose a path grounded in talent and collaboration and, because of this, earned respectability across the country and amongst her peers. Most famously (as did Langtry) she had become close with Henry Irving, an actor seen as the face of theatre. In 1925, Terry became only the second actress to receive the Dame Grand Cross of the British Empire, an award for contributions to the Arts, Science or the Public (Wikipedia, 2025). Her career was centred around theatre and talent. Limited

sources about her endorsing beauty products and ways to appeal to the male gaze have been located. Anything she did had a minuscule impact compared to Langtry across the beauty and fashion industry. Her focus on talent shielded her from objectification. This way, deliberately or not, she avoided being reduced to 'just' a beauty. She had creative agency and gained lasting respect as an artist and someone not reduced to that of a spectacle.

In conclusion, both women performed acts of feminism, although this has to be considered from different perspectives. Terry can be seen as more of a foundational feminist - a traditional feminist perspective. She asserted that women have a place in intellectual and artistic roles, which can be responsible for feminist authors being allowed to spread the word of feminism in their writing.

Equally, from a modern perspective and analysis of circumstance, Langtry is also a feminist. She showed that women could become financially independent while using the opportunities given to them, operating in the sexist system in which she lived. Although not a radical feminist, she challenged patriarchal power through her money and visibility.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as predicted, one cannot give one definition that applies to all of feminism. All lives can lead through feminism through different factors. One may be more passive than another, but that certainly does not make them any less. Why should we judge from the outside when no one will truly understand one's life but the person living it?

This thesis aimed to explore whether Langtry can be viewed as a feminist figure through her engagement with fashion, celebrity, consumption, and her social roles from a modern perspective. Through analysis of feminist theory alongside object analysis and comparative case studies, the research came closer to a conclusion. There could not be a nuanced answer on whether she can be perceived as a feminist because it is solely up to the reader's opinion. The answer is far more complex than a yes or no. I hope that the reader, alongside some of my opinions, can conclude if she can be perceived as a feminist through the range of sources I was able to provide.

These sources included fashion worn by Langtry and endorsed by herself, press coverage, letters and biographies. In particular, I found opinion-based primary sources the most valuable as they led me to see a range of perceptions towards the Jersey Lily at the time, as well as more modern work and how she is still relevant to the fashion and advertising industry today. The most significant gap for research

was the surviving garments; there were limited sources, and those that survived were more accessories for her costumes. Thankfully, there are many photographs of her wearing her attire, which enables reflection.

Langtry's life enabled exploration and understanding of the constraints in fashion and society on women. Her choices challenged traditional femininity through her independence and image management. Her fashion choices were not just surface but tools for survival, performance, and influence.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that figures like Langtry enable the expansion of what we view as feminism today. Feminism can often be layered and context-driven.

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