‘Scandalous Satins’: An Investigation of Lady Teazle’s Dress from Herbert Beerbohm Tree’s 1909 and 1912 productions of The School for Scandal

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These graceful fashions of early Georgian days are far removed from the most elegantly draped dresses of the twentieth century ... [therefore] it is ... almost impossible ... that any serious attempt can be made to revive dresses of the early Georgian period without at the same time returning to the leisured courtesies, the studied movements, and the spacious apartments of those bygone days.

Westminster Gazette, 14 April 1912¹

Herbert Beerbohm Tree (1852-1917) was a pillar of the late Victorian and Edwardian stage, famous for both his flamboyant character acting and his management of Her/His Majesty’s Theatre in London.² Known for both conventional and experimental drama, Tree staged plays which featured many historical eras and wildly varying themes, from Shakespearean tragedy to modern comedies. To a large extent, the success of these plays depended upon the beauty of the stage tableaux, or the manner in which scenery was displayed to create a series of ‘living pictures’. Surviving stage photographs of these productions seem to show straightforward representations of a given historical period, but on closer inspection it becomes clear that they were heavily influenced by contemporary fashion — overwhelmingly so in the case of costume.

While there is a wealth of information on Tree’s productions from the point of view of theatrical, performance and literary history, practically no scholarly work has been undertaken from the perspective of the fashion and art historian. The research in this article originated in a doctoral thesis focusing on Historical Realism and historical ‘accuracy’ in Tree’s stage costumes, and focuses on the importance of employing a ‘practice as research’ methodology. ‘Practice as research’ involves the inclusion of costume reproduction and interpretation, which is undertaken in order to fully understand complex modes of representation. The unique introduction of a ‘practice as research’ technique definitively illustrates to what extent the costumes of such productions mirrored or influenced contemporary dress, and shows how nineteenth and early twentieth-century artists, actors, managers, designers, couturiers and authors referenced and re-imagined both their past and their own contemporaneousness.
The ‘practice as research’ technique involves making and wearing a replica of one of the play’s costumes along with two extant reproductions: one from the intended time setting of the play, and one based on fashionable garments contemporaneous to the play’s staging. Wearing these costumes enables scholars to gain first-hand experience of the differences between the garments: for example, wearing 1620s costume alongside that of the 1890s, or a 1760s sack dress with corsetry from the 1910s. This approach has not been used in other art or theatre-based research and is a relatively new technique, even for costume historians. This article addresses how late Victorian and early Edwardian designers and audiences saw the past, and how their visual interpretation of history was made coherent and relevant on the stage. Paying particular attention to the influence of the theatre on fashion, the extent to which historical stage costume affected contemporary dress will be considered, as well as the ways in which contemporary dress infiltrated the finished ‘historical’ costumes. To investigate these concerns it is imperative that the construction of costumes be thoroughly explored. The first recourse would be detailed examination of the garments themselves, but no complete costumes from Tree’s productions survive. The only option remains costume reproduction and interpretation.

‘Historical Realism’ and Victorian Theatre

‘Historical Realism’ was a major factor in many forms of Victorian art. Works by Shakespeare and Sheridan, as well as many plays set in the past, enjoyed great popularity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Evidence of contemporary popular enjoyment can be seen through the number of plays produced: of 88 plays staged by Tree at the Haymarket Theatre and Her/His Majesty’s, 55 were historically themed. Tree also staged plays set in ten different countries, not counting Britain, and numerous fantastical, fictional locations. As a keen member of the Costume Society, an institution predominantly run by artists such as Lawrence Alma-Tadema and managers like Henry Irving, Tree wanted to increase awareness of ‘accurate’ fashion history against the “modifications and vulgarisations of the stage costumier”. ‘Archaeological correctness’ — a term used to express as close a representation as possible of a historical period — was of prime importance and taken extremely seriously.

The ‘practice as research’ method has been applied to Tree’s production of Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s The School for Scandal (1777), staged at His Majesty’s Theatre in 1909 and revived in 1912-13 — by far the most successful of Tree’s eighteenth-century themed endeavours. In 1913 The Daily Sketch described it as “…surely among the good things which improve with age”. Tree staged the production with creative flair coupled with technical expertise, with the help of designer Percy Macquoid, who was responsible for all design aspects of the production. Macquoid chose to costume the play in 1765, the year Sir Peter marries Lady Teazle in the
drama. The designer chose to replicate the fashions of the mid 1760s because he believed the period was “novel and very representative of the last phases of early Georgian decoration and costume”. However, when studied alongside surviving eighteenth-century garments, Macquoid’s reproductions betray the influence of his own interpretation. The costumes from the original staging and the revival were not exactly the same, but the inspiration drawn upon in 1909 had clearly been employed once again in 1912, with all leading characters’ gowns sporting similar early twentieth-century interpolations. The Westminster Gazette quotation which opens this article poses a key concept for the case study: while audiences delighted in the quaintness of a bygone age, they acknowledged that a return to the “leisured courtesies and studied movements”, necessary for any ‘faithful’ dress revival of the eighteenth century, was unfeasible and, indeed, undesirable. Yet there prevailed a strong passion for the era and its costume, and an overriding appreciation of the ‘costume play’ even if the narrative power of the drama was sometimes deemed somewhat diminished as a result. “If its action and sentiment have lost the force they had in the days when it was not a ‘costume play’”, a Daily Sketch critic commented in 1913, it had “acquired the interest of its old manners and charm”.

This article focuses on two costumes: the polonaise (‘Polish’) gown [Fig. 1], which reached the height of its popularity in the 1770s and 80s, and was worn by actresses Marie Lohr in 1909 [Fig. 2] and Phyllis Neilson-Terry in 1912 [Fig.,
when playing Lady Teazle; and Macquoid’s replica robe à la française [Fig. 5]. This case study highlights obvious costuming discrepancies — their exaggerations and limitations — and the sporadic criss-crossing of the years 1760-1770 with which Macquoid adorned his stage. His dresses had a distinct eighteenth century ‘feel’ to them, but were unlike any extant garments that I have encountered over the course of my research. I discovered how these dresses were constructed for Tree’s productions of the play, and considered the similarities of patterns and techniques used by Macquoid compared to those employed by eighteenth-century dressmakers. To illustrate Macquoid’s costumes’ similarities to 1910s dress, I created a replica of a contemporary gown worn by Neilson-Terry in 1912-13 [Fig. 4], while promoting her appearance in Tree’s production of *Drake*, a drama set in Elizabethan times, written by Louis N. Parker in 1912.
To present women in sack-backed gowns — also known as the ‘robe à la française’ — was by no means an unusual choice for a production of Sheridan. The style has been taken as representative of the time in which the story was set, although many theatres have chosen to style the actors in the fashions of the late 1770s, when the play was written. This decision is entirely at the discretion of the director and designer, and makes very little difference to the plot or characterisation. Recent scholarly work on eighteenth-century dress presents conflicting opinions as to which style is most representative of the era. In *Historical Fashion in Detail*, Avril Hart and Susan North declare that “of all the eighteenth-century styles it is the polonaise that has caught the population as the embodiment of eighteenth-century female dress”8, while Jane Ashelford believes that “the most typical dress of the eighteenth century was the robe à la française or sack”9 [Fig. 5]. Similar indecision seems to have been rife in the early twentieth century, as Tree and Macquoid decided to use both the polonaise and française in inventive, albeit sometimes unusual, ways. However, the dresses produced were also very similar to contemporary interpretations of eighteenth-century fashion, as evidenced in photographs from the enormously popular fancy dress balls of the period. The costumes from such events were fully documented in the press, in much the same way as stage costumes. Not only were the gowns admired for their picturesque quality, but the period itself was also hailed as laudable for its perception (and practical attainment) of beauty and for its “‘grand air’ which characterised the society of the French Court.”10

Until the French Revolution — which vastly simplified dress — the impractical robe à la française had been indicative of luxury and wealth, and both it and the robe à la polonaise were worn alongside each other until the robe a l’angalise and simple ‘round gown’, an early version of the Regency empire-waisted style, became common wear in the 1780s and 1790s. In “revealing the natural lines of the body” they shared some similarities with the “sheath-like” dresses of the 1910s, as Anne Buck has discussed.11 The play’s version of a robe à la française was based upon images of the popular sack gown, which dominated women’s dress until the late 1760s. By 1765 this style — an elaborately trimmed and decorated dress worn at royal presentations — had become almost exclusively adopted as court costume, and was known as a ‘court mantua’. The common robe à la française was a long gown with deep-set fabric

Fig. 5. ‘Lady in Hoop Dress’, from Braun & Schneider’s *The History of Costume*, c.1880.
pleats hanging from between the shoulders. It was almost always worn over wide panniers or side hoops, creating the familiar hip silhouette which is still recognisable today. The introduction of the polonaise gown heralded a more relaxed and ‘rustic’ approach to dress: pastoral artists frequently used the style to depict shepherdesses and ‘country girls’ in a romantic and carefree light. The fashion was popular with working women, albeit in more practical and greatly simplified forms, as the slightly shorter underskirt and overskirt, which could be looped up away from the dusty road, made manual work easier. In its fashionable incarnation in the 1770s and 1780s mostly younger, highly fashion-conscious women wore the dress. It is therefore easy to see why Macquoid chose to costume Lady Teazle in the robe, but his interventions in terms of dress construction are less clear.

The robe à la polonaise, perhaps more than any other fashion, has come to typify representations of ‘Little Bo Peep’ and romanticised images of the lower classes. It was used by François Boucher in the bucolic Dreaming Shepherdess (c.1760) and The Love Letter (1750) and an early Edwardian audience would have recognised the style. However, Macquoid wished to create a series of stage tableaux as eighteenth-century in flavour as possible, and that meant costumes which, at first glance, would be novel to his audience. The designer also had to make sure he did not imitate recent trends in his work. The polonaise skirt came back into fashion in the late 1860s, and reappeared frequently over the next twenty years during the ‘bustle era’. Although very different in construction and aesthetics, the bustle’s similarity to its eighteenth-century ancestor is nonetheless apparent. To make the dress appear as authentic and yet as accessible as possible, Tree looked to Macquoid to create something quaint, charming and purposefully exaggerated.

The press reactions to The School for Scandal reveal a rose-tinted view, which resurfaced with each new generation’s production of the play, and added an allure to the dress of the previous centuries. Reviews of the play were also free of any deeper literary analysis. Contrary to his infamous line and scene cutting in Shakespearean adaptations, Tree stuck fairly closely to Sheridan’s original text. Educated men like Tree and Macquoid knew and understood the play well, but their costume choices do not necessarily correlate to specific traits in the drama’s characters. The actresses wear both polonaise and française gowns, which vary little apart from in their colour and trimmings. This is perfectly acceptable for upper-class Georgian women, but the designs betray none of the parody and social expectations of the female characters. The girlish Lady Teazle was attired very similarly to the older characters, with little to suggest her humble background, and her novice — and spendthrift — status in the world of fashion. The stereotypical view of the eighteenth century in the Edwardian mind limited Tree’s options in terms of producing a ‘historically correct’ play, although he would also have been influenced by the popular mindset.
For Tree’s production, both the principal polonaise and a version of the française were worn with contemporary, and therefore inappropriate, undergarments. The undergarments seem to have been used by Macquoid as an attempt to produce a gown based on the best of each style. Consequently, I made both mid-eighteenth century stays and a hip-length 1910 corset, eighteenth-century petticoat and one ‘base’ gown which could be modified to suit both styles. Macquoid’s française was an open gown worn à la polonaise, but more like a typical sack in shape, with the panniers as the principal focus of the dress, extending out some ten to twelve inches each side from the wearer’s waist [Fig. 6]. In its earliest incarnation, the robe à la polonaise was worn with hoops, but before long simple hip pads had been adopted to create a soft, rounded edge to the skirt [Fig. 7]. This made the dress appear light and airy, as opposed to the effect created by the squared-off panniers of earlier gowns. Macquoid’s ‘fusion’ of the polonaise and française styles, with the drapery pulled tightly to the back of the garment, takes all original purpose from the invention of the polonaise [Fig. 8].

Correct underwear is essential when recreating the dress of any period; it is the foundation upon which the whole shape and structure of a costume is built. Throughout the eighteenth century the emphasis was on an extremely flat bodice,
allowing for a stomacher upon which costly silk and embroideries could be displayed to their best advantage. It is clear from the photographs of Neilson-Terry and Lohr that both actresses refused to discard their contemporary, bust-enhancing S-shaped corsets. However, Tree and Macquoid felt the need to entice their audience as well as desiring authenticity. It was mainly the shape of Macquoid’s gowns, rather than the colours or trimmings, which betray that they were made in the 1908-13 period. Every generation’s interpretation of the past, however, is inevitably influenced by their own style, and twentieth/twenty-first century designers have often made concessions in plays and films to make historic costumes more alluring to a modern audience. These are alterations we might not even recognise until our own fashions have once again changed, and is at the time of writing particularly evident in BBC television adaptations such as *The Forsyte Saga* (1967) *Sense and Sensibility* (1971), *Northanger Abbey* (1986) and the film *Emma* (1996).

When wearing the reproductions, I much preferred the (deceptively) simple elegance of the reproduction extant polonaise, based on surviving examples [Fig. 9]. The loosely draped and longer skirt does not hamper the petticoat beneath, and enables it to merge with, and match, the overskirt. When the skirt is worn ‘à la Macquoid’, the underskirt is weighted down into a somewhat tubular shape, causing the drapery above to dominate the garment. The skirt on the ‘original’ example is also easier to move in; with the *School for Scandal* style, the wearer is always conscious of the prominent side bustles, and needs to adopt careful posturing, especially of the arms, to ensure the desired shape is retained. However, this ‘careful posturing’ could have been deliberate. The audience’s perception of eighteenth-century stance and demeanour would have been heavily influenced by images featuring française dresses with the wearer’s arms held out in order to display the wide skirt to its best advantage. Such stylised ‘historical’ posturing was popular throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which Lou Taylor describes as “those unconscious postures of mind and body which members of a social group will display as features in common”12 When wearing Macquoid’s polonaise, my arms inevitably raised to reveal the shape of the skirt, the first image that came to mind was that of the eighteenth-century minuet dance [Fig. 9].

The basic bodice and skirt of both styles conform to original pattern pieces and construction; Macquoid and his costumers made their interpolations in the
subsequent draping, trimming and, most importantly, in the lack of historically correct underwear. The most paradoxical error of Macquoid's designs was his use of pleated sack-back gowns worn à la polonaise. Certainly the Edwardian public at large, and many of the critics, had no idea that the two styles should not be worn together; indeed this discrepancy was heralded as completely authentic. The fact that these dresses were worn with hoops seems to be the feature which most appealed to the public and to the critics, despite its historical inaccuracy. Although no images survive of Tree's School for Scandal actresses from the back, the photographs strongly suggest that pleats hung from their shoulders, and in all the images the hips are a powerful focus point.

In order to give their expectant audience the 'best of both worlds', Tree and Macquoid decided to combine the softness of a polonaise with the sharp hip definition of a sack gown, finishing with 'Watteau pleating' (referred to as such because the painter Watteau loved this feature of his sitters' dress) hanging from the shoulders. This seems to have been a conscious decision which also meant that, for certain gowns, the same petticoat and, on occasion, the over-dress, could be used twice. Therefore, pleats for my reproduction were made separately. Incredibly, according to M. R. Holmes's Stage Costumes and Accessories in the London Museum, detachable pleats might well have been a feature of actual eighteenth-century style costumes in Victorian and Edwardian theatres. Perusing the collection of the London Museum, I came across several theatrical examples, and confirmed:

The dress that Marcus Stone designed for Ellen Terry paid eye-service to the eighteenth century to the extent of having a separate train intended to simulate the box-pleated sack-back that should really be an integral part of the dress, but [which corresponds] very closely to the fashions of her own time, and could almost have been worn by her at an afternoon tea.\(^{13}\)

Certainly, there are surviving tea gowns which feature Watteau-like pleating at the back, which would probably not have been detachable, but which are a good example of small historical elements creeping into contemporary dress, especially 'at home' wear. Wearing my version of the sack-back with extant reproduction underwear both looked and felt far more appropriate. The skirt, allowed to hang free over the side hoops as intended, fell to the ground smoothly and the pleats were nicely framed by the panniers [Fig. 10]. When wearing the dress with draped skirt and pleats, the view from the back is far less streamlined. Rather than the skirt falling gracefully to the floor from each side, the pleats in the centre balancing perfectly, the bunched-up skirt breaks the momentum and the pleats are left hanging free, oddly disjointed from the rest of the garment, their decorative purpose less clear-cut. At this point I was very aware that the pleats were completely detached from the skirt arrangement, trailing, misplaced, and hindering the polonaise drapery beneath.
The addition of a 1910s corset was undoubtedly the alteration that most changed the entire feel of the outfit. My pose, as well as the hang of the dress and the fit of the bodice, was irrevocably altered, and I found myself in a strange limbo of hip-length, tight-waisted corset coupled with extravagantly draped skirts over side hoops [Fig. 11]. Such a condition cannot have helped actresses to ‘become one’ with characters from almost two hundred years in the past. However, this comment is a particularly twenty-first century take on characterisation. Michael Booth refers to the choice actors had when approaching a part, whether to play it ‘emotionally’ or ‘intellectually’. Today, we might assume that both have equal relevance and importance. But throughout the nineteenth century the question of whether to “feel the emotions he portrays or simulate them by outward forms”, an idea crystallised by Diderot in 1830, was still of relatively small significance.\textsuperscript{14} Costumes undoubtedly helped an actor to express either emotion or intellect, but the relation of ‘the self’ to ‘the character’ is a distinctly modern theatrical contemplation. However, without a familiar body shape before them, the passionate yearning of critics to ‘revive’ elements of Georgian style in dress would probably not have occurred. Without a touch of sexual allure, as well as familiarity, the costumes might well have been viewed simply as quaint, laudable and totally unsuited to the modern world.

After wearing fairly restrictive eighteenth-century costume, I was surprised that the 1910s dress [Fig. 4] was less liberating in contrast than I had expected. The corset was far more disabling than its Georgian predecessor, encasing more of the body and being tighter laced, although more lightly boned. The skirt was of course much easier to move around in, although its tubular shape (indicative of the ‘hobble skirt’ craze which was becoming popular at that time) necessitated slower and more conscious walking. Doris Langley Moore described the costumes of 1910-12 as possessing “long lines, slender and almost curveless.”\textsuperscript{15} When wearing my version of a 1912 dress I have to disagree: the outfit in which my body felt most ‘curveless’ was undoubtedly the eighteenth-century gown, with its

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\textbf{Fig. 10.} Reproduction ‘Macquoid’ polonaise. Photo: Lydia Edwards.

\textbf{Fig. 11.} Reproduction française assembled according to extant samples. Photo: Lydia Edwards.
flat bodice and artificially created bulk at the hips. The 1910s corset forces the body into a succession of curves, especially around the waist and bust and, despite moving away from the serpentine S-shape of 1900-09, is much more figure-hugging than the strict eighteenth-century stays. Apart from the images contained in the University of Bristol Theatre Collection, we have no other pictorial record of the performances, and no other images or film footage, so we can never be entirely sure how Tree’s actresses deported themselves onstage. But Ellen Terry, a contemporary of these actresses, spoke at length about the costumes she wore in Irving’s Shakespearean productions, and had her own very firm opinions on the subject. But, as was so often the case in the patriarchal world of Victorian London, it was Irving who eventually got his way, and Terry conceded: “Although I knew more about art and archaeology in dress than he did, he had a finer sense of what was right for the scene” 16 This is an important statement in itself — and in relation to this research — as it suggests that Historical Realism was not always the most important thing, but rather the overall aesthetic and theatrical feel of the piece.

**The Limits of the Usefulness of Historical Realism**

It is vital, when carrying out an experiment such as this, never to lose sight of the fact that the genre of play and its own textual requirements are incredibly important. *The School for Scandal* was foremost a comedy of manners, a product of the humour and politics of its own time, but still intentionally outrageous and exaggerated. Costumes used in Restoration comedies can also achieve a general feel of the era, allowing the script to speak for itself. In Allardyce Nicoll’s words, “The manners school ... depends rather on an atmosphere which cannot be precisely analysed than on outstanding characteristics” 17 However, it is certain that costume was an incredibly important part of Tree’s productions, and had a substantial influence on his audiences. This keenness was probably due more to the costumes’ effect on contemporary fashion than on any sincere audience desire to witness a cast of characters clothed with painstaking accuracy. In an age when Historical Realism is often openly sought in film, television and stage productions, it can be difficult to appreciate that Tree’s nineteenth century theatrical methodologies might have been more concerned with how his work affected the audience in the real world, and in pandering to common taste in order to swell the box office. I attempt to recreate garments from extant sources, with no particular figure in mind, not creating clothes specifically for Lady Teazle who is, after all, entirely fictional, and thereby has no place in the ‘real world’. It must be considered to what degree a fictional character should be granted artistic license when being brought to life on the stage or screen.

Evocation of a former age is one of the surest ways to demonstrate that the past can never be the present. As Andrew Schiller notes in his article ‘The School for Scandal: The Restoration Unrestored’, “Sheridan … made an excursion into the
Restoration, an act of literary nostalgia … His purpose was clear: to write a neo-
Restoration high comedy of manners”. Therefore, Macquoid’s interceptions could
carry less weight when it is remembered that Sheridan’s original play was itself a
conglomeration of contemporary appeal with historical devices. So prominent was
the significance of The School for Scandal to an Edwardian audience that they arrived
with a multitude of conflicting expectations about Tree’s version of this classic farce.
While the production was, as with any other, a risk, it was also one of the safest of
Tree’s choices. For one, he had a wealth of previous versions going back almost 150
years from which to draw inspiration. The play had been performed several times in
the years leading up to Tree’s first attempt, so he had the benefit of access to recent
reviews of his competitor’s various approaches. This might go some way to explaining
why the press reviews seem, on the whole, to have been largely positive. The costumes
achieved that happy compromise of both familiarity and nostalgia — nostalgia, in
this case, for a world none of the audience had personally known, and thus viewed
through rose-tinted spectacles. I believe this was a key part of its success: costumes
may have been modernised, but everything else — the script, the setting, the cultural
and societal jokes — were truly and authentically eighteenth-century, imbued with
the hindsight of no other period. This is what makes The School for Scandal a unique
example, and one that demonstrates the extent to which costume and set design
can give historical pieces a decidedly fashionable edge. Its value as a case study is
two-fold: first by providing evidence of quaint, comfortable and beautiful theatrical
escapism at a time when escapism was much needed as war was on the horizon, and
secondly by throwing the fast changing trends of the dress reform movement into
sharp focus for the modern-day scholar — a vitally important research tool.
1 Author unknown, *Westminster Gazette*, 14 April 1913. Herbert Beerbohm Tree Archive, University of Bristol Theatre Collection (HBT/TB).

2 At the time of Tree's purchase in 1897 until Queen Victoria's death in 1901, the theatre was known as 'Her Majesty's'. From that point on, the theatre was referred to as 'His Majesty's'. It is currently named for Queen Elizabeth II.

3 The Costume Society was an academic society established in London in the 1880s for the education and appreciation of the history of dress.


