

Dressing the Part: Ellen Terry (1847-1928)



Ellen Terry (1847-1928) with her granddaughter Nellie in ca.1919. Terry is dressed in a costume she originally wore as Nance Oldfield (possibly in the *Pageant of Great Woman* in 1909). The surviving costume is now held by the Museum of London. [Photograph, Ellen Terry Collection, Smallhythe Place]

Dr Veronica Isaac
v.t.isaac@brighton.ac.uk

Ellen Terry (1847-1928): Our Lady of the Lyceum

“Of Ellen Terry, the actress, Our Lady of the Lyceum as Oscar Wilde used to style her, what a series of wonderful pictures live in the memory. Ophelia. A pale shadow with bright hair, the perfect Portia, effulgent, golden, Camma of ‘The Cup’, beautiful exceedingly...a very pageant of fair women shown in the likeness of one fair woman.’ [Robertson, *Time Was*, 1925]



Terry as Ophelia in *Hamlet*, 1878.
[Victoria and Albert Museum]



Terry as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, 1879
[Victoria and Albert Museum]



Terry as Camma in *The Cup*, 1881
[Victoria and Albert Museum]

Premise of the book:

A Biography narrated through and centred round - dress



‘There is something, I suppose, in a woman’s nature which always makes her remember how she was dressed at any specially eventful moment of her life, and I can see myself, as though it were yesterday, in the little red-and-silver dress I wore as Mamillius...’

[Terry, *Story of My Life*, 1908]

Left: Charles John Kean and Ellen Terry as Leontes and Mamillius in *The Winter's Tale*, Princess Theatre, 1856 [Victoria and Albert Museum]

Exploring Terry's wardrobe: Both selective and serendipitous survivals

An actress who was 'more concerned with her dresses than with Shakespeare's lines?'

- Michael Holroyd, *A Strange Eventful History*, 2008

The collection includes:

- Costumes worn by Terry at the Lyceum Theatre
- Costumes worn by fellow performers at the Lyceum
- Costumes worn by Terry's brother Fred Terry
- Costumes created by her daughter Edith Craig (worn by Terry and others)
- Some examples of Personal Dress (relating to Terry and others)

'My Ophelia dress was made of material which could not have cost more than 2s. a yard, and not many yards were wanted, as I was at the time thin to vanishing point! I have the dress still, and, looking at it the other day, I wondered what leading lady now would consent to wear it.'

- Ellen Terry, *The Story of My Life*, 1908



Ellen Terry as Ophelia in Hamlet, 1878 © National Portrait Gallery and an image of the surviving costume, National Trust.

Entering a specific Artistic and Cultural Context

“The day of my wedding it was very cold...I wore a brown silk gown which had been designed by Holman Hunt, and a quilted white bonnet with a sprig of orange-blossom, and I was wrapped in a beautiful Indian shawl. I "went away" in a sealskin jacket with coral buttons, and a little sealskin cap.”

[Terry, *The Story of My Life*, 1908, p.46]

Right: ‘*Choosing*’, a portrait of Terry wearing the brown silk wedding dress designed for her by William Holman Hunt. Painted by the artist G.F.Watts in 1864. [National Portrait Gallery Collection]



Adopting 'costumes' to suit her stage sets

‘The floor was covered with straw coloured matting, and there was a dado of the same material. Above the dado were white walls, and the hangings were cretonne, with a fine Japanese pattern in delicate grey-blue. The chairs were of wicker with cushions like the hangings, and in the in the centre of the room was a full sized cast of the Venus of Milo, before which was a small pedestal, holding a little censer from which rose, curling round the Venus, ribbons of blue smoke. [...] Presently the door opened, and in floated a vision of loveliness! In a blue kimono and with that wonderful golden hair, she seemed to melt into the surroundings and appeared almost intangible.’

[Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson, *A Player Under Three Reigns*, 1925: 66-67.]



Oak and cane chair, ca.1875-1880.
Designed by E.W. Godwin,
[Victoria and Albert Museum]



Silver censer, ca.1600-1650,
[Victoria and Albert Museum]



Statue of the *Venus de Milo* perceived by Aesthetes to embody the ideal female form,
[Louvre Museum, France.]



Samuel A. Walker, Photograph of Terry, wearing a kimono c.1874. [Victoria and Albert Museum]



J.M. Whistler, *La Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine*, 1863-1864, [Freer Gallery of Art]



Terry's daughter Edy, posing in a Kimono given to Terry by Whistler, Taken in Camden Road, possibly by Herbert Watkins, c.1874. The kimono and this photograph survive in the collection at Smallhythe Place.

An Icon of Aestheticism on and off the stage

‘Miss Ellen Terry is ‘aesthetic’; not only her garments but her features themselves bear the stamp of the new enthusiasm.’

[Henry James, *Nation*, c.1879]

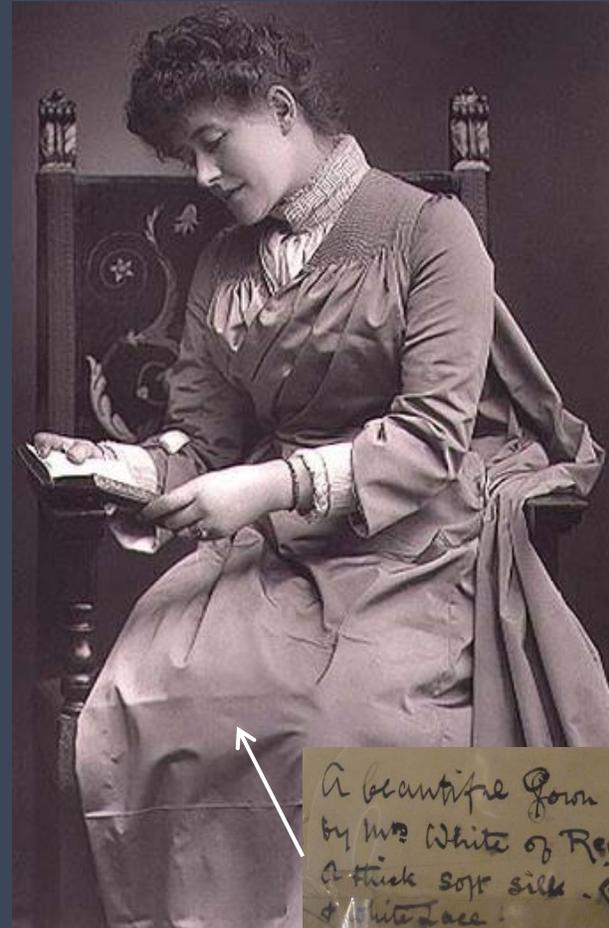


Two Photographs of Ellen Terry. c.1880.

Left: [National Trust Collections]

Above: [Victoria and Albert Museum]

Photograph of Ellen Terry, Arthur Ellis. c.1885 [Victoria & Albert Museum]



A beautiful gown made by Mrs White of Regent St
A thick soft silk - grey
& white lace



Caricature of Terry, c.1880s. [Press Cutting, Garrick Collection]

Memories of Love and Loss: The ‘Liberty Dress’

‘ [...] a letter’s in my lap from my little boy Edward (6) [...] another’s in my pocket from my man that he loves me”
– Ellen Terry writing to Stephen Coleridge in 1877



Raw Tusso silk dress, hand embroidered in coloured silk threads, one of the few examples of Terry’s surviving personal dress, c.1877-1882.

[National Trust Collections, Smallhythe Place]

Re-affirming public and private identities: Ellaline in *The Amber Heart*, 1887-1902



‘I wish I could tell you of the dream of beauty that you realized’

- [Letter from Henry Irving to Ellen Terry quoted in *The Story of My Life*, 1908]



Terry as Ellaline in *The Amber Heart*, Lyceum Theatre, 1887 [Victoria and Albert Museum]

A version of the surviving costume, probably a ‘re-make’ created by Ada Nettleship [National Trust]

Challenging and subverting public and private identities: Lady Macbeth, 1888 - 'The Beetlewing Dress'



“I wish you could see my dresses. They are superb, especially the first one: green beetles on it, and such a cloak! The photographs give no idea of it at all, for it is in colour that it is so splendid. The dark red hair is fine. The whole thing is Rossetti--rich stained-glass effects. I play some of it well, but, of course, I don't do what I want to do yet. Meanwhile I shall not budge an inch in the reading of it, for that I know is right. Oh, it's fun, but it's precious hard work for I by no means make her a 'gentle, lovable woman' as some of 'em say. That's all pickles. She was nothing of the sort, although she was not a fiend, and did love her husband. I have to what is vulgarly called 'sweat at it,' each night....”

[Terry, writing to her daughter Edy, 1888]

John Singer Sargent, *Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth*, 1889. Oil on canvas. [Tate Britain]



A preparatory sketch made by Sargent and subsequently presented to Terry, circa 1888 [Ellen Terry Collection]

‘There is something more in my acting than charm’

‘[...] 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.’ – Alice Comyns-Carr, *Reminiscences*, 1926



‘...difficult to deal with is the Lady Macbeth of Miss Ellen Terry. That it is convincing, few would maintain. It is however divinely beautiful. The woman who, in a quaint and indescribably beautiful costume, reading by the light of the fire the letter of her husband...might had stood in the court of Camelot, and gained wonder and homage of Sir Galahad as well as Sir Lancelot’

[Review in *The Morning Post*, 1888]

Left: Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth in Act I of *Macbeth*, 1888 [Victoria & Albert Museum]



The original costume. Details of beetle wing cases and the crochet structure [National Trust]

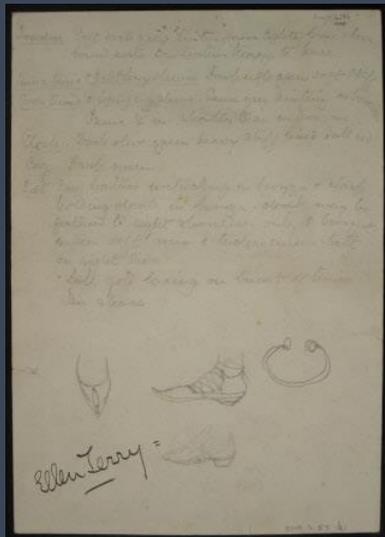
‘One of the loveliest dresses I ever wore’: *Cymbeline*, Ellen Terry as Imogen - 1896



Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema. 1896.
Costume designs for Ellen Terry as 'Imogen' in 'Cymbeline'. [National Trust]

“Sir Laurence Alma-Tadema did the designs for the scenery and dresses in *Cymbeline*, and incidentally designed for Imogen one of the loveliest dresses that I ever wore.”

[Terry, *The Story of My Life*, 1908]



Hand-coloured photograph of Ellen Terry as Imogen in 'Cymbeline'. The photograph first was printed and published by Window & Grove, 1896 and re-issued in 1906 (Terry's jubilee year). [National Trust]



‘A Freewoman?’

‘Where are the women of whom and for who you write who are free?...We might perhaps hazard the name of one Freewoman who has become a sufficiently national figure to make her mention impersonal – Ellen Terry. There, at least, is one...’

[*The Freewoman*, 1911]



Left: Pamela Coleman Smith, Image of Terry as Hiördis, in *The Vikings*, ca. 1903. [Victoria and Albert Museum]
Above: Terry’s costume, designed by her son Edward Gordon Craig and made by her daughter, Edith Craig [National Trust]

Right: Lean Connell, Photograph of Terry as Nance Oldfield, in *The Pageant of Great Women*. Published by the Suffrage Shop, 1910. [Victoria and Albert Museum]
Below: Detail of the surviving dress [Museum of London]

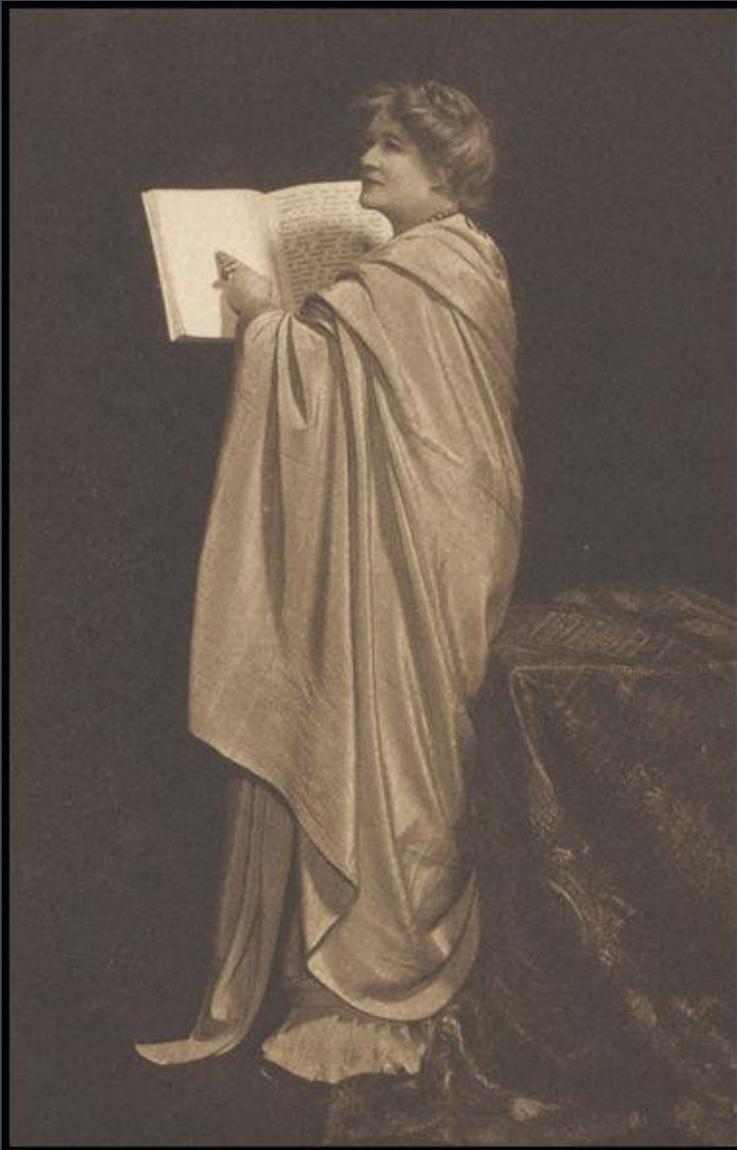


Photograph by Miss Lena Connell, 50, Grove End Road, N.W.

Copyright.

Ellen Terry as Nance Oldfield.

Establishing a position as an artist worthy of a place amongst the 'theatrical aristocracy': Lectures on Shakespeare 1910-1915

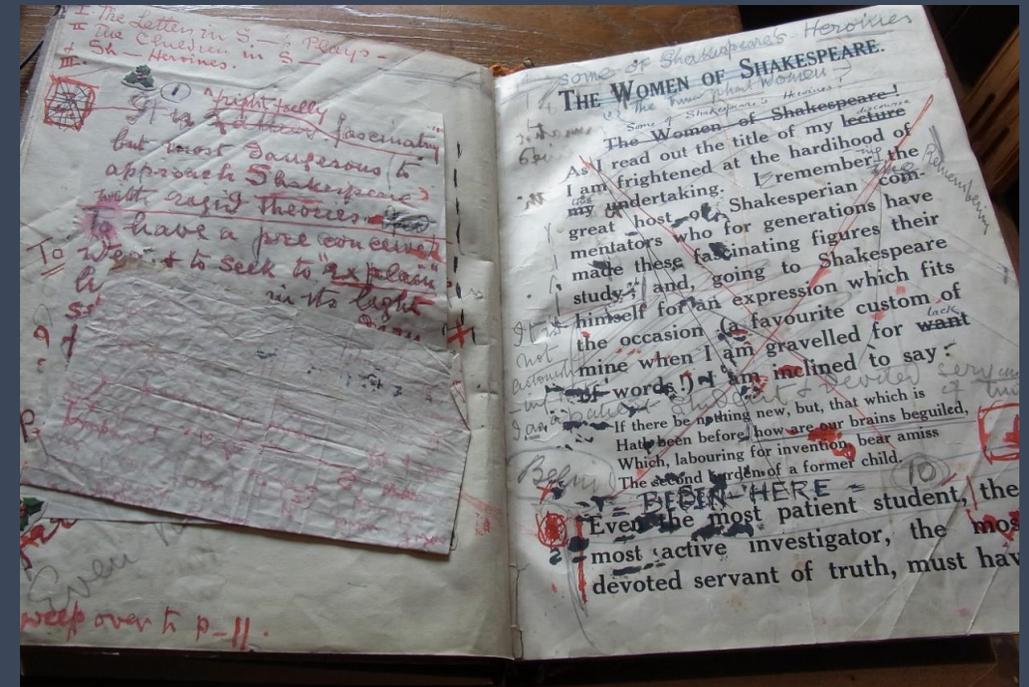


‘Wonderful women! Have you ever thought how much we all, and women especially, owe to Shakespeare for his vindication of women in these fearless, high spirited, resolute and intelligent heroines?’

[Terry, “The Triumphant Women”, *Four Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. Christopher St., John, 1932, 81.]

Sepia photograph of Ellen Terry during her lecture tour, 1910.
[Victoria and Albert Museum]

Terry is dressed in the academic style robes created for her by her daughter Edith Craig. She used different colours to suit the theme of each lecture.



Page from Terry's notes for her lecture on 'The Women of Shakespeare' [National Trust Collections, Smallhythe Place]

Dame Ellen Terry in Puzzledom (1918-1928): Seeking comfort in Kimonos and Chinese Robes

'I am unhinged (not unhappy) and uncomfortable. I wonder where everything is. Cannot remember new things. All is changed. Change at 73 puzzles the will. I live in puzzledom.'

[Terry, diary entry 1921, quoted in *Ellen Terry's Memoirs*, ed. Christopher St John & Edith Craig]



To Mary = Remembrance
of her affectionate + an
amusing friend
1918.
Ellen Terry



Right: Postcard capturing Edith
Craig and Terry on the day the
latter was made a Dame in 1925
[Victoria and Albert Museum]



Left: One of at least two 'Chinese'
Robes worn by Terry from c.1910
onwards [National Trust]

Left: John Copperfield, Ellen Terry in a loose kimono.
1918. Photograph. © National Portrait Gallery

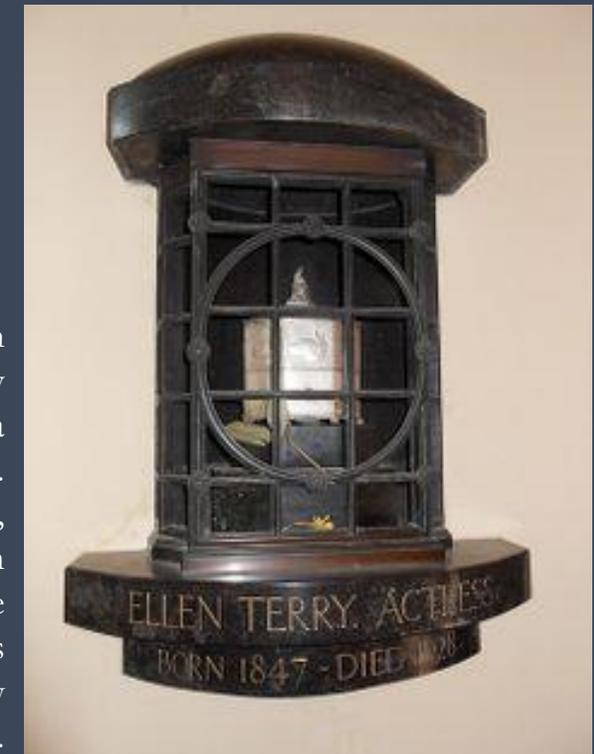
‘Fashioning’ a legacy

[...] Edy dedicated herself to preserving the memory of her mother. The house was obviously an important part of this; but she was also anxious to dispel the impression of Ellen that often came through articles about her, that she was a charming scatterbrain.’ - [Joy Melville, *Ellen and Edy*, 1987]



Terry’s coffin being carried from her house (background) to Smallhythe church. The Coffin was covered in a funeral pall created by Terry’s daughter – the costumier – Edith Craig (purportedly from old stage costumes). All the mourners were asked to wear colourful clothing (‘no funeral gloom’) [Photo by London Express/Getty Images, 24th July 1928]

The silver urn in which Terry’s ashes are now kept. This urn is part of a memorial to Terry in St. Paul’s Actor’s Church, Covent Garden. The urn was installed in the Church a year after Terry’s death, but cared for by Craig until this point.



“Magic in their fibres”



‘Ellen’s stage clothes became such a part of her that some magic seemed to belong to them. I know her daughter Edith Craig never liked them being cleaned, she said it spoilt them and the magic went out of them.’ - Sybil Thorndike, Transcript of Audio Recording, Smallhythe Place, 1960.



Thank you for listening!

Dr Veronica Isaac

v.t.isaac@brighton.ac.uk

v.isaac@fashion.arts.ac.uk

Left: Ellen Terry in one of the costumes (a red/gold damask gown) that she wore as Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* in c.1882. © Victoria & Albert Museum