

Bodies in Biography: the Case of Mary Ann Yates's missing months

The young actress who would become the diva tragedienne Mary Ann Yates was fired in April of 1753 because, manager Thomas Sheridan claimed, she was 'incumbered with bulk.'¹ David Garrick hired her six months later on account of her 'graceful figure.'² Pregnancy is the only real explanation for the sudden change in Yates's figure, but because there is no archival evidence of a pregnancy or child – and perhaps because male historians are less attuned to the ways in which pregnancy shapes women's professional lives – this firing and rehiring has been described instead as a 'shaky start' and evidence of a need for training – by men.³ While the misrepresentation of fertility for incompetence highlights the continuing need for feminist biography, this story raises another challenge for the feminist biographer: focusing on the unmarried actress's dismissal for/while pregnant risks tying her to the familiar actress-as-whore trope. Recovering Yates's gravid body both recuperates and diminishes her professional history. This talk will use Yates's possibly gravid body as an example of the challenges of writing feminist biography, particularly of actresses whose bodies cannot be separated from their art.

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¹ Actor, L. (1787) "An ACCOUNT of Mrs. M. A. YATES", *The European Magazine, and London review*, vol. 11, pp. 313-318. Quotation from p. 314.

² Hifferran, P. ([1754]-1755) 'The Tuner', London: M. Cooper, p. 5.

³ 'Mrs Yates, though she developed into one of the most important tragedy queens of the century, had a shaky start. She was well-received at her debut, but David Garrick let her go after her first season. Arthur Murphy and Richard Yates helped to train her, and one must suppose that Garrick, since he took her back into the company in 1756-57, also helped instruct her.' *BDA Biographical Dictionary - Eighteenth Century Drama: Censorship, Society and the Stage* - Adam Matthew Digital