

Adventures in Nineteenth-Century Gender-Bending: Lady Emilia Don in Tasmania, 1862 and 1865

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Many leading ladies of the nineteenth century stage have attracted significant biographical attention from scholars in the field of theatre history. Lady Emilia Don, however, remains largely forgotten, even though evidence of her Australian tours suggests she was a highly acclaimed figure of the stage during the 1860s. Her two visits – first with her husband in 1861, and then again as ‘name’ star in 1864 – were widely publicised for a variety of reasons, and examining her Tasmanian publicity in 1862 and 1865 offers a valuable point of entry for analysing the reasons behind this fascination. A number of important events occurred in Tasmania that coloured perceptions of Emilia as a public figure and these, in turn, influenced her engagement with colonial audiences and her relevance to community culture. It is the aim of this article to shed new light on Emilia’s significance by examining why aspects of her tours were reported by Tasmanian media men in such sharp detail. Revisiting the content of these colonial artifacts offers a rare glimpse into the professional life of one of the most popular visiting actresses of the 1860s, as well as addressing a longstanding gap in scholarship acknowledging Emilia’s remarkable performances of gender.

Lady Don was apparently born Emilia Eliza Saunders,¹ the eldest daughter of London actor John Saunders,² sometime in the 1830s. She likely initiated a theatrical career prior to assuming her title, but there is little press to verify her stage activities prior to marrying a minor baronet-cum-actor, William Henry Don, on 17 October 1857.³ This could imply that her skills were unremarkable, although it is more likely that she only attracted historical interest after her marriage into minor aristocracy. One English writer of the early twentieth century claims that Emilia made her stage debut in Liverpool on 21 February 1859⁴ thanks to her husband, but this seems unlikely considering she hailed from a theatrical family. Another English historian, G. Rennie Powell, wrote in 1919 that Emilia appeared alongside William on the Bristol stage during the 1858–59 season, and that between them the couple ‘introduced two new items, “The Evil Genius” and the Farce “The Tragedy of the Seven Dials”’.⁵ Early twentieth-century theatre writers in Australia have helped to reclaim part of Emilia’s past before her marriage.

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A manuscript written around 1910 by Humphrey Hall and Alfred J. Cripps claims that 'in 1854 Lady Don, then Miss Emily Saunders, was playing with a stock company at the Queen's Theatre, Great Brunswick Street, Dublin'.⁶ Although Hall and Cripps also pay more attention to her husband, this piece of Emilia's past is a welcome addition to what stands as an obscure and incomplete picture.

That Sir William Don was a colourful character of pedigree, probably explains why historians fail to regard Emilia as a serious figure in her own right, although it is true that his circumstances greatly influenced hers. The 7th Baronet, Sir William Henry Don, was born in Scotland on 4 May 1825 to the 6th Baronet, Sir Alexander Don and his second wife.⁷ Biographical accounts claim that William was 'Page of Honour at the marriage of Queen Victoria',⁸ and that as an adult he served as 'a lieutenant in the 5th Dragoon Guards in 1843, and extra *aide-de-camp* to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1844'.⁹ William married a German called Antonia Lebrun of Hamburg in 1847,¹⁰ and the union produced a daughter to Lebrun,¹¹ although the couple (apparently) divorced. Don was called as a witness by the salacious Lola Montez, Countess of Landsfeld, at her 1853 trial for the assault and battery of the then prompter of the Varieties Theatre in San Francisco, George J. Rowe.¹² Later, Don spent time in a debtor's prison. He wrote to the American dramatic superstar Joseph Jefferson while he 'languished' in the Ludlow Street jail in the United States in 1851, suggesting 'Come and see me. If you have not been in this establishment it will be quite a treat for you.'¹³ Later, he spent two weeks in a debtor's prison in Bristol in 1857, the same year he married Emilia. By all accounts William was literally a difficult man to ignore – not only because of his past and his penchant for 'wearing nail-can toppers, and trousers of blinding plaid'.¹⁴ Biographers fixate on the actor's height – 'nearly two meters tall without his stovepipe hat',¹⁵ according to some – while others still conjure a giant of a man, claiming him 'a seven-foot soldier'¹⁶ or 'well over two metres tall'.¹⁷ William shrewdly exploited his height by using grandiose bills to promote his Australian performances. Prior to appearing in Launceston in 1862, reporters noted the presence of bills which featured the word DON in 'letters in six feet'.¹⁸ His extraordinary height, together with his unusual past and flamboyant, but exclusive, publicity – these huge bills did, after all, showcase the word 'Don', and did not promote the 'Dons' as a couple – presumably explains why William's story is always afforded greater interest than his wife's.

But judging by what was written about Emilia Don in the 1860s, it is easy to see she was a remarkable figure in her own right. In fact, her publicity suggests that she nurtured at least two quite distinct public personae. On the one hand, evidence indicates that she conducted herself, both on stage and off, with all the pedigree colonials probably expected of a baronet's wife. On the other hand, however, there was a side to her that

seems to suggest she took great delight in subverting the ideal of ‘her Ladyship’. Emilia was happy to officiate at public ceremonies, and she used the stage as a platform for conferring various honours. She also demonstrated her humanitarianism by donating part of her earnings to charitable organisations, and by staging performances for orphaned children free-of-charge and organising for them special treats in the form of pints of milk, apples and slices of plum cake.¹⁹ But her titillating performance of some comic songs, her many ‘male’ parts, and her later reputation as a demanding actress and difficult woman to work with, evidence that she challenged many of the social mores that colonials projected onto ‘her Ladyship’ as a woman in the public sphere. Perhaps Emilia had no choice but to develop an almost schizophrenic public persona. Fulfilling all the civic functions expected of a ‘Lady’ probably tempered the fact that her husband, William, sometimes acted in ways many might have considered unbecoming the last heir of a title dating back to 1667. There is much evidence to suggest that William never took seriously his duty as a baronet – at least not the imperative to manage the family’s fortune – and that he actually parlayed his reputation as an unorthodox man of pedigree into his stage career. The evidence suggests that Emilia’s primary function was to off-set William’s occasionally worrying publicity.

The Melbourne *Argus* claimed in 1910 that William ‘was prominent in that set of lively young men who, under the leadership of the daredevil Marquis of Waterford, achieved considerable notoriety by their wild practical jokes, some of which brought them occasionally before the Bow-street magistrate’.²⁰ Other historians also allude to a gambling problem, while still more blame Don’s money problems on the fact that he was a spendthrift. Claims that ‘within three years [Don] managed to run through an estate worth about £85,000’,²¹ seem to authenticate allegations that he lived to regret his squandering, particularly given that another writer places the actual value of the baronetcy at ‘£180,000’.²² ‘On the occasion of a farewell benefit somewhere in the west of England, Sir William Don, from the stage, delivered a passionate exhortation to young men to avoid the fast life what had brought him to ruin.’²³ The reality that William had completely exhausted his family estate by the time he met Emilia suggests that William was a baronet in name only.²⁴ Not having a family fortune or estate to add credibility to the honorific probably also explains why the couple used their titles as a convenient tactic for self-promotion. One suspects that colonial media saw right through the ploy. *Bell’s Life in Sydney* concluded in 1862 that William’s decision to adopt the stage as a ‘means of livelihood’ was ‘a course far more honourable and independent than either misting himself upon his wealthy relatives, or being pitchforked into the government of some colony, or into some consular appointment, the usual refuges of ruined men of quality’.²⁵ How ironic then that Don’s decision to turn to the stage as a ‘means of livelihood’ eventually ‘pitchforked’ him into the colonies

nonetheless. The couple arrived in Australia in 1861 courtesy of theatrical entrepreneur George Selth Coppin, and their publicity suggests they were promptly well regarded. After their first performance on 22 January 1861, *Bell's Life in Victoria* claimed the pair were 'really refreshing, after the imposters and mountebanks, by whom [the] colony [had] been overrun'.²⁶ *Bell's Life in Victoria* also claimed on 26 January 1861, that William was 'the first man of rank who [had] ever taken to the stage as a profession'.²⁷ If this was true, then Emilia was probably the first woman, at least the first seen by Australian audiences.

The couple arrived in Launceston aboard the *Royal Shepherd* on 12 February 1862 and played a short season of only a week before turning their attentions to Hobart. From their first performance together in *Child of the Regiment*, it was clear to the *Mercury* that Lady Don's Josephine was the chief character of interest because the 'part assigned to the Baronet [was] a very subordinate one'.²⁸ Playing various drum-rolls and rhythms on her snare 'in the character of the *vivandière*',²⁹ as well as singing airs such as 'Ever for Thee', suited what the *Mercury* claimed was 'Lady Don's charming vivacity as an actress, and sweetness of voice as a songstress'.³⁰ William's role in *Rough Diamond* as the afterpiece afforded him an opportunity to shine; as 'Nothing could be more grotesque', suggested the *Mercury*, 'than his impersonation of "Cousin Joe" – the awkward lout'.³¹ But even on the occasions when William was the focus – such as his Billy Lackaday in *Sweethearts and Wives* – his wife dominated publicity. Emilia's character of Laura offered a 'racy rendering of Madame Vestris's old popular song "Why are you wandering?"' that fascinated the *Mercury* critic, and the fact that she was due to appear as 'the Wonderful Scamp' in *Aladdin* only reinforced allusions to Vestris, because the critic remembered her presentation of James Robinson Planche's extravaganza of *Aladdin* at London's Lyceum.³²

'Decided *animus*'³³ and 'vulgar and cowardly slander'³⁴ characterised the first two occasions when William really did dominate publicity in Tasmania. 'Paterfamilias', a critic for the Melbourne *Advertiser*, accused the couple of presenting a version of Harrison Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* and later a version of 'Auber's' *Black Domino*. Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* had attracted hostile criticism from many English critics who accused the writer of plundering the 'Newgate Calendars' as his source, and later held the play responsible for a murder.³⁵ And although Don publicly declared to Hobart theatregoers his distaste for the piece – 'I perfectly agree with all my heart in all that has been said about "Jack Sheppard"; it is a horrible piece; I never assisted in it, I never would'³⁶ – he admitted to performing 'a drawing room travestie of it'³⁷ on 3 March 1862.³⁸ The *Mercury* thought the presentation quite well done because Emilia's impersonation of 'a poetical "Jack Sheppard"' had 'strangely [discomposed] Mr Harrison Ainsworth's ideas of the character as originally conceived'.³⁹ The *Mercury* qualified this opinion by noting her characterisation was 'compounded of gallantry, impudence,

and roguery'.⁴⁰ Although 'Paterfamilias' attacked the Dons for presenting Matthew's adaptation of *Black Domino* – which apparently corrupted the original plot of Daniel-François-Esprit Auber's three-act comic opera of 1837 – the so-called 'newspaper controversy',⁴¹ that followed seemed more to attack William's financial credibility than to question the merits of the piece. William declared that both 'controversies' were the result of 'some political purpose',⁴² which seems accurate considering that versions of *Jack Sheppard* and *Black Domino*⁴³ had already appeared in Australia much earlier.⁴⁴

Hobart's press was very quick to defend the Dons' credibility against these mainland censures. The *Mercury* reported that the three encores and 'continued clapping of hands' following their performance on 6 March 1862 demonstrated 'most unmistakeably [sic] how repugnant to the public feeling of Hobart Town the libels' were, and further declared it was 'proof of the good-feeling of the audiences' toward them.⁴⁵ These claims bring to the fore how crucial the Dons were to discourses of community solidarity, and in particular to promoting Tasmanian identity. Print media in Hobart played a central role in cultivating a powerful social pleasure, as there was no better time to exemplify Tasmania's relevance, not only to the Dons, but also to mainland Australian colonies, than by actively encouraging 'the contempt and disgust of every right-minded man',⁴⁶ in the couple's defence. Journalists saw the opportunity to defend the Dons as being ideologically significant, and made it a political issue by publishing in the *Mercury* what Don himself had claimed all along: that 'the lying defamers' were trying to create at the Dons' expense 'a little political capital'.⁴⁷

It is possible to read Emilia's role in this public versus personal partnership as being itself highly politicised. On the one hand, publicity of the 'slander' always emphasised that Lady Don's character was also being 'assailed'. This meant that defending the couple against 'foul',⁴⁸ 'vulgar and cowardly',⁴⁹ slander was codified as defending 'her Ladyship's' honour as a requisite of nineteenth-century masculinity. On the other hand, however, is Emilia's own response to the cultural drama. Whose decision it was that Emilia 'most good-naturedly gave that barbarous piece of comicality "My Johnny was a Shoemaker"' before the final curtain – and after William's 'address' to Hobart playgoers – can only be guessed. But publicity clearly indicates it was a very clever tactic, and the immediate effect was twofold: it galvanised community support, and perhaps gilded an otherwise tarnished social reputation. Presenting an 'extraordinary absurdity',⁵⁰ garnered even greater public loyalty as it was thanks to Emilia that audiences left the theatre in very good spirits for two nights running because of the 'laughter-moving',⁵¹ encouraged by her coy but spicy rendition of the song.

Reviews began to report serious declines in William's state of health later that month, suggesting that Emilia's new role as a widow was only a question of time. After performing to particularly good crowds for over three

months, the couple's tour ended prematurely with yet another spectacle. The irony of the size of the lettering proclaiming the arrival of 'Don' was probably not lost on those who witnessed Sir William being laid to rest in a grave six feet deep after he died unexpectedly on 19 March 1862 of what the *Mercury* reported was an 'Aneurism of the Arch of the Aorta'.⁵² The fact that the body was buried (in three coffins)⁵³ after a private ceremony at St David's Cemetery, Hobart, on 22 March, but later exhumed and transported back to Scotland via the *Harrowby*, added yet another spectacle to the couple's cultural presence.⁵⁴ And perhaps, too, the fact that Tasmania was the site of all this sensation even afforded the colony a little 'political capital' of its own.



'Sir William Don is very tall, and a most accomplished man as an actor, whether in English, French, or German plays it is alike to him, and no matter what sphere or phase of life.' (Joseph Jefferson, *The Autobiography of Joseph Jefferson* 136)

As 'Lady' and 'laughter-mover',⁵⁵ and wife and widow, Emilia's marriage seemed to lead to her adopting many personae. And Hobart playgoers welcomed Lady Don's new roles as headliner and manageress when her 'Great Star Company',⁵⁶ which included Tasmanians Emma and Clelia Howson, and Hattie Shepparde, arrived via the *Tasmania* direct from Sydney on 15 April 1865. Her concentration on comic pieces, as well as her new approach to acting, were two stylistic changes that stood out for the *Mercury* critic, who reported she had 'become even more comical than when last

among us', and further predicting that the 'abandon' which characterised her performances 'could not well be excelled'.⁵⁷ In fact, so sure was the *Mercury* of Emilia's excellence and star-power that it promised 'a programme which for novelty, quality, and quantity bid fair to eclipse any hitherto presented to the playgoers of Hobart Town'.⁵⁸

Emilia lived up to her publicity. A 'new proscenium',⁵⁹ as well as stalls and a parquet were Theatre Royal modifications completed during her tenure. Her presentations with highly popular stage personalities – such as Emma, Clelia and Frank Howson, Hattie Shepparde and G. H. Rogers – were characterised by their 'strict accordance with historical truth',⁶⁰ and the *Mercury* credited her production of *Perseus and Andromeda* with inaugurating the 'new magnesium light' in Tasmania, and claimed her innovative use of the technology on stage as 'one of the greatest triumphs of modern science'.⁶¹ She singled herself out as the only actress of the day to have her version of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861) personally endorsed by Braddon herself,⁶² and not only did her version of *Ali Baba, or the Forty Thieves* feature 'new Local Allusions, written expressly by a Gentleman of Hobart Town',⁶³ but it was an 'entirely original spectacular Extravaganza, adapted expressly for Lady Don'.⁶⁴ A local poet, Howard Anstead from Oatlands, penned a poem in her honour called 'The Mayflower', and all present in the audience received a complimentary printed and illustrated copy of the poem at one of her performances.

There was a reason why Don's publicity promoted her as 'Universally acknowledged as "Ne Plus Ultra" of Burlesque Acting'⁶⁵ in 1865. The genre encouraged experimenting with performances of gender, and Emilia's publicity indicates that she dazzled playgoers in 'male' burlesque parts. She delighted audiences as the 'saucy' Aladdin in Byron's *Aladdin, or the Wonderful Scamp*, even though the 'localised' allusions failed to hit their mark, with the *Mercury* wryly concluding after the troupe's presentation in 1865 that 'we fear some of the best and most ludicrous of the puns fall harmless upon colonial ears'.⁶⁶ As Myles Nacoppaleen in Bryon's 'latest London novelty', a burlesque called *The Colleen Bawn*, 'for the first time in the colony'⁶⁷ in 1865, Emilia attracted very favourable reviews as 'a model stage Irishman, in fact a perfect Pat'un'.⁶⁸ And her skills at gender-bending sent the *Mercury* critic into a female/male confusion after she delivered a 'very talented representation' as Francis Osbaldiston (another 'male' role) in *Rob Roy*, even with 'the unavoidable exception of the female voice'. Her body obviously attracted the reviewer's attention, although one is left to wonder exactly how 'Her Ladyship's fine figure enabled her to assume the guise of the wayward scion ... with perfect compatibility'.⁶⁹ Other 'male' parts in burlesque included Abdullah in *Ali Baba, or the Forty Thieves*; Perseus, 'the most intrepid of classical heroes',⁷⁰ in the burlesque *Perseus and Andromeda*; and the Prince in a burlesque of *A Winter's Tale* 'slightly adapted from Shakespeare',⁷¹ called *Prince Florizel*.

Selby's farce *The Married Rake* proved another vehicle to showcase Emilia's skills at playing both 'female' and 'male' roles, often in the same production. She had done this earlier, in 1862, when she played Jack Sheppard and two 'female' parts in the farce *That Affair at Finchley*. But her male and female roles in *The Married Rake* were very different; there was Mrs Trictrac, 'a teasing, tormenting, bewitching young widow', and Cornet Fitzherbert Fitzhenry, 'an elegant extract, a regular lady-killer, the *beau idéal* of a cavalry officer'.⁷² The genre of farce offered Emilia a dramatic opportunity to play out the more titillating aspects of her persona in such contrasting roles.

By examining Emilia's songs – always crucial to her performances of gender – it is possible to organise her vocal repertoire into two basic categories, each emphasising specific gender representations. There were her 'serious' ballads, which relied heavily on prevailing attitudes toward femininity, and there were the more 'racy' songs in which the performance of gender was much more fluid. Emilia's interludes of 'National Ballads' and 'marital songs' offered powerful anthems of colonial identity and these she performed in costumes iconic of Victorian womanhood. Pieces such as 'Death of the Nelson', 'Rory O'More', 'Auld Lang Syne', 'John Anderson my Jo' and 'Lady Don Valse' by J. Winterbottom (1856) were perennial favourites to a colonial class loyal to the ideologies of British Imperialism. Emilia's presentation of Brahms' 'Death of the *Nelson*' was also highly praised⁷³ and the *Mercury* claimed that her selection of Irish ballads always 'created such a furore'.⁷⁴



This illustration of Emilia appeared in the Melbourne *Punch* (24 November 1864) accompanied by a verse:

'With figurehead unmatched,
 And lines so shapely laid,
 And sailing power out-stripping all;
 Of nought afloat afraid,
 She bounds upon the stage a tar,
 With voice of cheery tone;
 And Dibdin's songs she carols forth,
 As she can pipe alone ...
 In song and dance alike alert,
 At Lloyd's esteem A1,
 We'll own this jocund tar to be
 'Mong sailors quite a Don.'

Showcasing Emilia's symbolic power as a 'figurehead' depended on the aesthetic compatibility of her dress. And she certainly cut a patriotic figure in full skirt, tunic-style jacket and feathered headdress. Even though the Celtic flavour and regimental epaulets of her garb do seem, at first glance, an odd companion to the seafaring metaphor of the text, both image and ode combined to drive home potent symbols of cultural meaning. 'Her Ladyship' standing beside a barrel illustrated with an Australian coat-of-arms, poised with raised glass in the gesture of a toast, coupled with the two pistols crossed to her left, all implied Imperial-colonial unity. The illustration saluted many ideals of nationality that colonials held dear, and by looking a little closer at the verse, it is possible to read another subtext in relation to Don's adventures in gender performance. The use of 'tar' in reference to Emilia – a colloquial term for a seaman or sailor – alluded to her female/male shifting, and the accompanying text seems to suggest this: 'We'll own this jocund tar to be 'Mong sailors quite a Don'. The pun on the word 'Don' (as in, to put on clothing) also seems to allude to her cross-dressing.

J. B. Buckstone proved an ample source for the performance of vocal pieces characterised as risqué. Some songs Emilia sang as a 'female' but presented them as stereotypes of nineteenth-century femininity. These included 'MacGregory's Gathering' (from Buckstone's farce *A Rough Diamond*), and the 'intensely ludicrous' but 'quaint and broadly comic song "My Johnny was a Shoemaker"' and 'Maid with the Milking Pail', both from Buckstone's comic farce *Maid with the Milking Pail*. Emilia's performance as Milly struck the *Mercury* critic as 'a racy piece of acting',⁷⁵ and her characterisation of the role is particularly significant when examining the ways in which she subverted the ideal of 'her Ladyship' and moreover challenged the duality of the icon's social power by using the genre of farce.

Back in 1862, when she appeared in the role in Launceston, ‘The sauciness and independence of Lady Don as “Milly” [in *Maid with the Milking Pail*] were very amusing’ according to the *Examiner*.⁷⁶ More telling of the concessions granted to Don as a stage performer was the claim that ‘the frequent vulgarities introduced by her were very characteristic’.⁷⁷ We can only assume that these ‘frequent vulgarities’ relied heavily on innuendo and suggestive humour. But this attitude toward Don’s ‘characteristic’ performances tells us something important about the kinds of pleasures her ‘frequent vulgarities’ satisfied among colonial audiences. Clearly, Don’s presentations of such roles promised a provocative spectacle, not only because of the material, but because of its delivery by a woman of some social standing: Emilia’s ‘Milly’ was, after all, a milkmaid. This also tells us something important about the way Emilia dealt with social constraints and moved within community cultures. She surely understood the civic currency of her status as a ‘Lady’; the fact that she presented ‘frequent vulgarities’ without censure, even in the role of a lowly milkmaid, suggests that manipulating the community’s obvious cultural fondness of her was one way to respond to structural constraints of gender and class.

Also central to Emilia’s vocal repertoire were the pieces she sang as ‘male’, and much of her popularity as an actress can be explained by her appearances as the Earl of Leicester in ‘the glorious Historical Extravaganza’⁷⁸ entitled *Kenilworth, or, Ye Queene, Ye Earle, and Ye Maydene* (1857). Comments about the production’s lush scenery and opulent costumes followed reviews marvelling at Emilia’s performance of songs such as the ‘exquisite’ ‘Goodbye, Sweetheart’. But reviews of Emilia’s acting in William Brough’s one-act comic burlesque also reveal how she deliberately challenged the constraints of nineteenth-century gender norms. She did this in other pieces, too, such as her role as Aladdin, ‘a shrewd, saucy street lad’,⁷⁹ and she was obviously very successful in the genre generally, as the *Mercury* reported after her appearance as Orpheus in Byron’s *Orpheus and Eurydice* that ‘she has no superior in burlesque’.⁸⁰ But *Kenilworth* was different. Singing as she always did ‘The Garter Song’ was not only ‘the cleverest parody in the burlesque’,⁸¹ it was an erotic woman-playing-a-man-playing-a-woman highlight that set racing the pulses of many of her male admirers. ‘Lady Don’, claimed one review, ‘as the stately courtier in doublet and hose, shattered the hearts of the *jeunesse dorée*, and her song “The Countess’s Garter”, became the rage at musical parties’.⁸²



Emilia Don's performance as the Earl of Leicester in *Kenilworth* undoubtedly inspired this illustration printed by the *Melbourne Punch*, 29 September 1864. The following lines accompanied the image:

‘Knight sans peur sans reproche
 They one and all confess’d her
 So gracefully she trod the stage
 As Dudley, Earl Of Leicester ...
 Some thoughts arose as these I saw
 Of one whom charmed us lately;
 Brimfull of quirks, and quips and cranks
 A monarch tall and stately.’

It is clear from this illustration why Emilia’s role as the Earl of Leicester, and in particular her performance of the ‘Garter Song’, was ‘the rage at musical parties’. Showcasing the garter just below her left knee was salacious in itself, because attention was drawn to Don’s outfit of a high-cut pantaloon-like costume and stocking-clad legs from mid-thigh to ankle. And Don would have certainly played up this spectacle, perhaps interlacing the garter through her fingers or letting it snap against her leg. So the source of subversion was not only visual – with Emilia emphasising a playful yet powerful sexual agency as a woman/man – but also provocative. This role suggests that Don used titillation as a way of challenging the ‘Ladyship’ ideal as a figure of substantial cultural conservatism in the Victorian era.

Victorian melodramas such as *Lady Audley’s Secret* were also subversive, but relied less on farcical allusion and more on ideological content. Emilia’s version of Braddon’s text was provocative because of its themes of sexual transgression and madness. Theatrical versions of Braddon’s novel were very popular in Australia generally,⁸³ most likely because they staged in lush detail the underside of class-based morality and encouraged women to participate in the spectacle. This is particularly relevant if, as Zoe Aldrich has argued, Braddon’s novel offered women ‘a powerful prototype of the “adventuress” ... [with] potentially subversive representations of femininity’.⁸⁴ Don’s presentation of the piece is therefore especially important considering that Braddon’s particular (some say ‘subversive’) representations of femininity were rendered true-to-life in Don’s treatment of the text (of which she retained copyright). Crucially, the theme of the ‘adventuress’ was probably emphasised even more in the figure of Emilia Don herself, considering that she had ‘adventured’ to Australia twice – the second time on a solo expedition and pursuing a ‘venture’ she controlled economically, thus successfully epitomising her venturing spirit in Tasmania as a ‘talented *entrepreneur*’.⁸⁵

It is true, however, that for every expression of autonomy in *Kenilworth* or *Lady Audley’s Secret* there was the ubiquitous social pressure to maintain the ideal and to capitalise on Emilia’s status as ‘her Ladyship’. Hobart’s horseracing industry shamelessly exploited Emilia’s civic authority by

scheduling a number of presentations after her stage performances. Officials called upon 'her Ladyship' to present the winning jockey of the Queen's Plate horserace with a mounted whip 'in solid silver' after her performance in *Aladdin* on 27 April 1865,⁸⁶ and the next day she replicated the ceremony by awarding a prize of ten guineas to the winning jockey of the steeplechase 'for the Lady Don Purse' at the New Town races.⁸⁷ Her donation of 'a purse of sovereigns' was certainly generous, and probably explains the names given to some of the horses entered in an event called the Hurry Scurry – among them, Rory O'More (one of Emilia's songs). It was the same story during her previous tour in 1862, when a racehorse named 'Lady Don' ran at the New Town course the week Sir William Don died.⁸⁸

Emilia's Tasmanian publicity evidences that she performed many versions of femininity and masculinity, and perhaps that she actively constructed so many public personae to challenge the two constants of her colonial identity: her subjectivity as 'her Ladyship' and her personality as Sir William Don's widow. Tasmania's colonials took great pleasure in both identities, which were essentially one and the same, because it was through the ideal of the 'Lady' that many accessed faraway loyalties to the Imperial homeland. But Emilia's Tasmanian press does show that she deliberately maintained an uneasy balance between playing up her image as 'her Ladyship' and subverting many of the ideological behaviours that comprised the ideal's symbolic power. This publicity also illustrates how complicit was the local media culture in participating in this subversion because her 'frequent' and 'characteristic vulgarities',⁸⁹ her sometimes 'racy',⁹⁰ acting, her 'sauciness',⁹¹ and her appearances as male protagonists 'compounded of gallantry, impudence, and roguery',⁹² were characterisations not reported with similar pleasure on the mainland.

Reviews of Emilia's Australian reappearance at Melbourne's Haymarket Theatre from 6 August 1864 frequently used words such as 'pretty', 'prettily' and 'vivacity',⁹³ to describe Don's delineations, and this does suggest that she toned down her gender-bending in mainland metropolises. She opened with her stock standard, *Child of the Regiment*, and followed with well-known pieces such as *Rural Felicity*, *Ali Baba*, *Kenilworth*, *Black Domino* and many more. Evidence indicates that Emilia's 'racy' songs were less 'racy' in Melbourne than in Tasmania. In fact, the *Age* noted that her performances of 'My Johnny was a Shoemaker', when she reappeared in 1864, were 'not given with quite so much vigor as formerly'.⁹⁴ This was similar to 1861, when the *Age* saw nothing sensational in Emilia's performance of the 'Garter Song', simply deciding it 'was in good keeping with our notions of a "comic extravaganza"'.⁹⁵ Publicity for the character was far more interesting in 1864 than Don's actual presentation. Advertising in the Melbourne *Age* characterised the Earl as he 'who studying to please his mistress sold his stud, and in consequence wears a ruffled front',⁹⁶ but the critic only remarked on

Emilia's 'vivacity' in the role, suggesting it, too, was subdued for mainland audiences.

This may shed light on trends in reportage, and/or Emilia's repertory decision-making. The fact that Melbourne publications printed both illustrations of Don – as 'figurehead' and as the Earl of Leicester – reveals that media men appreciated her cultural impact and were either less overt in reporting her more 'racy' performances, or perhaps had less to write about if Emilia tempered her 'vigor' in testing gender roles by softening her presentations to suit her audiences. That so many of Emilia's metropolitan performances attracted colonial elites suggests, too, that their frequent patronage influenced Emilia's freedom to push the limits of nineteenth-century gender types in mainland theatres, particularly in 1864. Within the space of only one month, Emilia's performances attracted Victorian officialdom from the then Governor, Sir Charles Darling (12 August and 13 September), to the medical professionals of Melbourne (7 October) and many representatives in between.⁹⁷ This is not to suggest that Emilia did not attract vice-regal or elite-class patronage in Tasmania. Rather, these occasions were less frequent, and her seasons shorter, perhaps affording her more opportunities to present less 'genteel' characterisations based on audience make-up and their taste for burlesques that confused gender roles.

The idea that geography influenced the freedoms afforded to Emilia to fashion, trial and experiment many subjectivities is one worth considering. If we take into account that Don's promotion in America billed her simply as 'Eliza' and 'Emily Don', and not 'her Ladyship', this would seem to indicate that national siting mediated her public identity. And even though Don's uneasy alliance with Frank Howson during part of her American tour made news back in Australia – *Bell's Life in Victoria* on 28 September 1867 quoted Howson as saying 'I would never have any more dealings with that lady ... if she came on the stage I and my family would walk off' – the snapshot of her image as a 'difficult' woman was yet another provocative persona. Emilia was probably demanding in Australia, too, but perhaps it was not widely reported.

Further problematising her various subjectivities is the fact that Emilia was also a mother. According to the Don family website,⁹⁸ Emilia's union with William produced one child: a daughter named Henrietta Grace Mary Don,⁹⁹ who is rarely, if ever, mentioned in Don's publicity. One wonders how she figured in Emilia's life, especially after her father's death and given her mother's frequent touring; also, whether the fact that she is such an indistinct being indicates Emilia's protectiveness towards her. Perhaps motherhood was one aspect of Lady Don's persona that she kept well hidden. This secrecy of identity makes the dazzling figure of 'the stately courtier in doublet and hose'¹⁰⁰ all the more jarring. Perhaps it was permissible to allude

to her sexuality in character, but another matter entirely to flaunt that persona as a woman of title who had a reproductive past.

Lady Emilia Eliza Don died in London in 1875 having travelled extensively.¹⁰¹ And considering that she seems to have played rather conservative roles in America and England, it is probably true to suggest that in Australia – and particularly in Tasmania – she exploited the distant geography to specifically experiment with gender, technology and public identity. Her Tasmanian press, therefore, offers unique insight in advancing understandings of female performer–managers of the colonial period and of how, as a stage woman and even one of some privilege, she appreciated the usefulness of distance in accessing a different – if not conclusively a greater – personal freedom. Whether it was because of Tasmania’s alienated situation, or its setting as the site of widespread public affection in the wake of ‘foul slanders’ and the unexpected death of Sir William, the colony’s media responses to Emilia Don, and her responses to that culture, evidence a reciprocity between ideological pleasures. Where she satisfied the craving among colonials to revere the ideal of minor aristocracy, the culture of desire so created satisfied Emilia’s own needs to ‘be’ much more than did the roles of wife or widow of a ‘ruined man of quality’. Certainly, she exploited that aspect of her cultural currency, but she also experimented with that ideal. Emilia Don’s responses to her various economic and social constraints – subverting and parodying gender stereotypes, making dramaturgical contributions to stagecraft, acquiring a reputation as a demanding and shrewd business woman, and her many radical personae – are the very complexities that qualify her as a nineteenth-century woman of real significance, who demonstrated genuine though problematic personal and public autonomy.

NOTES

- 1 Some writers refer to ‘Emily Eliza Saunders’, or ‘Lady Emilia Don’, while others use ‘Lady Emily Don.’ See J. M. D. Hardwick, ed., *Emigrant in Motley; the Journey of Charles and Ellen Kean in Quest of a Theatrical Fortune in Australia and America, as Told in Their Hitherto Unpublished Letters* (London: Rockliff, 1954) n. 51, R. J. Broadbent, *Annals of the Liverpool Stage from the Earliest Period to the Present Time Together with Some Account of the Theatres and Music Halls in Bootle and Birkenhead* (Liverpool: Edward Howell, 1908) 166, and Veronica Kelly, ed., *Annotated Calendar of Plays Premiered in Australia 1850–1869; An Interim Publication of the Australian Drama Project 1850–1900* (Queensland: University of Queensland, 1995) 140 respectively.
- 2 Some scholars and historians also refer to Emilia Eliza Saunders as ‘Emily E. Don’ or ‘Amelia Don.’
- 3 William Don was born on 4 May 1825.
- 4 Broadbent 234.

- 5 G. Rennie Powell (Rennie Palgrave), *The Bristol Stage: Its Story* (Bristol: Bristol Printing & Publishing Co., 1919) 54–5.
- 6 Humphrey Hall and Alfred J. Cripps, *The Romance of the Sydney Stage by Osric* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1996) 287.
- 7 Sir Alexander Don's second wife was the eldest daughter of John Stein. She later became Lady Wallace after her second marriage to Sir James Maxwell Wallace.
- 8 Hall and Cripps 288.
- 9 Hobart *Mercury*, 2 April 1862.
- 10 Sir William Don's union with Antonia Lebrun (d. 1869) produced one child, a daughter, Alexina Mary.
- 11 Alexina Mary Don married one Colonel Scheer.
- 12 See Bruce Seymour's transcripts of publications relating to the incident of Lola Montez's hearings in 'Chronological Documentation for 1853', © Bruce Seymour 11 September 2003.
<http://www.zpub.com/sf/history/lola/Bc1853.doc>
- 13 Joseph Jefferson, *The Autobiography of Joseph Jefferson* (London, 1889) 141–2.
- 14 Hal Porter, *Stars of Australian Stage and Screen* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1965) 13.
- 15 Katherine Brisbane, ed., *Entertaining Australia; An Illustrated History* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1991) 62.
- 16 Jefferson 133, Barry Duncan, *The St James's Theatre; Its Stage and Complete History 1835–1957* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1964) 102, and H. G. Hibbert, *Fifty Years of a Londoner's Life* (London: Grant Richards, 1916) 11.
- 17 See James R. Anderson, *An Actor's Life* (np, nd) 222, and John West, *Theatre in Australia*, (Stanmore: Cassell Australia Limited, 1978) 42.
- 18 Launceston *Examiner*, 11 February 1862.
- 19 See *Mercury*, 22 May 1865 for details of Emilia's matinee show for the children of the Queen's Orphan Asylum.
- 20 'Melbourne in the Sixties', Melbourne *Argus*, 8 October 1904.
- 21 Broadbent 166.
- 22 Hall and Cripps 288.
- 23 Hibbert 11.
- 24 William reduced an asset of 3,330 acres to 1,225 by 1847. Selling the rest the following year cleared his outstanding liabilities.
- 25 *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 29 March 1862.
- 26 *Bell's Life in Victoria*, 26 January 1861.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 *Mercury*, 25 February 1862.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 *Mercury*, 1 March 1862.

- 33 *Mercury*, 4 March 1862.
- 34 *Mercury*, 6 March 1862.
- 35 Valet François Courvoisier murdered Lord William Russell on 5 May 1840 after apparently reading *Jack Sheppard* and rising up against his master's hand.
- 36 *Mercury*, 4 March 1862.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 The Dons presented the farce *That Affair at Finchley*, and not *Jack Sheppard*, on 3 March 1862, although the *Mercury* did report that 'absurd criticisms' had 'contributed to the public impression that the piece to be played was the "Jack Sheppard" of the Adelphi'. See *Mercury*, 4 March 1862.
- 39 *Mercury*, 4 March 1862.
- 40 *Mercury*, 3 March 1861.
- 41 *Mercury*, 4 March 1862.
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 Charles Matthew's adaptation of *Black Domino* (Le Domino Noir) was criticised in 1862 because it apparently corrupted the original plot of Daniel-François-Esprit Auber's three-act comic opera of 1837.
- 44 Versions of *Jack Sheppard* appeared in both Hobart and Launceston as early as 1842.
- 45 *Mercury*, 7 March 1862.
- 46 *Mercury*, 6 March 1862.
- 47 *Ibid.*
- 48 *Mercury*, 7 March 1862.
- 49 *Mercury*, 6 March 1862.
- 50 *Mercury*, 27 February 1862.
- 51 *Mercury*, 12 March 1862.
- 52 *Mercury*, 22 March 1862.
- 53 Publicity reported that William Don's three coffins consisted of wood, then lead, and an outer coffin of 'stout' Huon pine.
- 54 Melbourne *Argus*, 12 May 1862.
- 55 *Mercury*, 12 March 1862.
- 56 *Mercury*, 10 May 1865.
- 57 *Mercury*, 28 April 1865.
- 58 *Mercury*, 17 April 1865.
- 59 *Mercury*, 29 April 1865. It is likely that Fry's proscenium was not strictly 'new' but a renovation to the existing proscenium.
- 60 *Mercury*, 6 May 1865.
- 61 *Mercury*, 25 May 1865.
- 62 *Mercury*, 1 May 1865.
- 63 *Mercury*, 12 May 1865.
- 64 *Mercury*, 11 May 1865.

- 65 *Mercury*, 5 May 1865.
- 66 *Mercury*, 26 April 1865.
- 67 *Mercury*, 1 May 1865.
- 68 *Ibid.*
- 69 *Mercury*, 24 April 1865.
- 70 *Mercury*, 20 May 1865.
- 71 *Mercury*, 27 May 1865.
- 72 *Mercury*, 10 May 1865.
- 73 The *Mercury* reported on 28 February 1862 that 'The song [Brahms's 'Death of the Nelson'] was given with telling effect, and the grouping of the Tableaux Vivants was admirable.'
- 74 *Mercury*, 26 February 1862.
- 75 *Mercury*, 6 May 1865.
- 76 *Launceston Examiner*, 20 February 1862.
- 77 *Ibid.*
- 78 *Mercury*, 10 May 1865.
- 79 *Melbourne Punch*, 20 October 1864.
- 80 *Mercury*, 22 April 1865.
- 81 *Mercury*, 8 May 1865.
- 82 'Melbourne in the Sixties', *Melbourne Argus*, 8 October 1904.
- 83 See John Spring, ed., *A Frequency List of Dramatic Performances Advertised in the Melbourne Argus between January 1860 and December 1869* (Melbourne: Monash University English Department, 1977) 24.
- 84 Zoe Aldrich, 'The Adventuress: Lady Audley's Secret as Novel, Play and Film', *The New Woman and Her Sisters; Feminism and Theatre 1850–1914*, eds, Viv Gardner and Susan Rutherford (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992) 160.
- 85 *Mercury*, 17 April 1865.
- 86 See *Mercury*, 28 April 1865.
- 87 See *Mercury*, 29 April 1865.
- 88 See press beginning 19 March 1862 (the date of William Don's death).
- 89 *Launceston Examiner*, 20 February 1862.
- 90 *Mercury*, 6 May 1865.
- 91 *Launceston Examiner*, 20 February 1862.
- 92 *Mercury*, 3 March 1861.
- 93 See *Melbourne Age*, 8, 9, 11 and 20 August 1864 for just a few examples.
- 94 *Melbourne Age*, 8 August 1864.
- 95 *Melbourne Age*, 4 February 1861.
- 96 *Melbourne Age*, 29 September 1864.
- 97 Other colonial elites attending Emilia's appearances in 1864 included the Mayor of Melbourne (19 August), the Minister of Justice (R. D. Ireland, QC), the Crown

Prosecutor (Travis Adamson), the Melbourne Bar (23 September), and the Caledonian Society (30 September), although there were many more.

- 98 'Don History', prepared by Lady Don-Wauchope. © Andrew Don-Wauchope, 2001–02, 11 September 2003.

<http://www.btinternet.com/~andrew.donwauchope/Donhistory.htm>

- 99 Henrietta married Everette Gray (d. 1891), and later John Sutterfield Sanders on 10 August 1892.

- 100 'Melbourne in the Sixties', Melbourne *Argus*, 8 October 1904.

- 101 Don's career after her tour to America in 1867 is obscure. Broadbent claims Emilia appeared at Liverpool's Rotunda Theatre in J. B. Buckstone's *The Daughter of the Regiment* on 19 August 1872. See Broadbent 295.