

from The Libertine by Stephen Jeffreys

Elizabeth Barry

You want me to leave the theatre? It is my livelihood. In an uncertain world. I see no one here who could provide for me better. So you have written a poem on the subject ...

*Leave this gaudy gilded stage,
From custom more than use frequented,
Where fools of either sex and age
Crowd to see themselves presented.*

*To love's theatre, the bed,
Yea thee and beauty fly together,
And act so well it may be said
The laurel there was due to either.*

*'Twixt strifes of love and war,
The difference lies in this:
When neither overcomes,
Love's triumph greater is.*

"When neither overcomes". That isn't the truth about love. It is invariably a war and there is always a victor and a vanquished What do you mean, you want me for your *wife*? You have a wife.

You have no understanding, do you? You have comprehended - just - that I am tired of being your mistress and your solution is to conscript me into becoming your wife. It is not being a mistress I am tired of, John. I am tired of you. I do not wish to be your wife. I do not wish to be anyone's wife. I wish to continue being the creature I am. I am no Nell Gwyn, I will not give up the stage as soon as a King or a Lord has seen me on it and, wishing me to be his and his alone, will then pay me a fortune to keep me off it. I am not the sparrow you picked up in the roadside, my love. London walks into this theatre to see *me* - not George's play nor Mr Betterton. They want me and they want me over and over again. And when people desire you in such a manner, then you can envisage a steady river of gold lapping at your doorstep, not five pounds here or there for pity or bed favours, nor a noble's ransom for holding you hostage from the thing you love, but a *lifetime* of money

amassed through your own endeavours. That is riches. "Leave this gaudy, gilded stage". You're right, this stage is gilded. It is gilded with my future earnings. And I will not trade those for a dependency on you. I will not swap my certain glory for your undependable love.

Nothing will effect a change in my heart. Not even the thing that is happening to me at this moment. It makes no difference that at this moment I have your child in my belly. I give you this news not to offer you hope, but to show you how far I have journeyed from you. I will have it this summer while the theatres are closed and by the start of the season I will be flat enough to play Desdemona in a nightgown.

You have children already. What difference do they make to you, what difference would another bring? If I *have* taught you to love life - and I confess I never set out so to do - then it was a good lesson for it is a thing that can never be learned too late. I thank you for what start you gave me on the stage. But, John, if I have taught you what you say, then our account is settled. Your lesson to me was my livelihood, and mine to you was life itself. We have no need to meet again. If you are in London and have half a crown in your pocket, you may see me *there*. For the rest I hope I shall be always in your heart and sometime in your thoughts but never in your debt.

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