# Leading Ladies: Sarah Bernhardt, Eleonora Duse, Ellen Terry

In the latter half of the 19th Century three actresses ruled supreme in the hearts of theatre-goers: the French Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923), the Italian Eleonora Duse (1858-1924), and the English Ellen Terry (1847-1928). They played all parts: from the classics of Shakespeare and Racine, through the romantics such as Dumas and d'Annunzio, to the new naturalists such as Ibsen. They toured the world but acted only in their mother tongue. Their emotional intensity and stage presence communicated with their audiences even when their words were not understood. They were the first superstars: idolized by their public, celebrated by artists, and honored by poets.

## Beginnings

Both Ellen Terry and Eleonora Duse were born to parents who were travelling players, and both began acting in childhood. Eleonora Duse and her father continued acting after the death of Eleonora's mother in 1875. In 1879, Eleonora received her first rave reviews for her performances as Ophelia in *Hamlet* and Elettra in *Oreste* at the *Teatro dei Fiorentini* in Naples. She married a fellow actor in 1881 and had a daughter Enrichetta before the two separated.

Although five of her siblings became professional actors, Ellen Terry was initially disillusioned with the theater. At the age of 16 years, she married the painter George Watts who was 30 years her senior. The marriage was unhappy, and Ellen left after a year to live with the architect Edward Godwin,

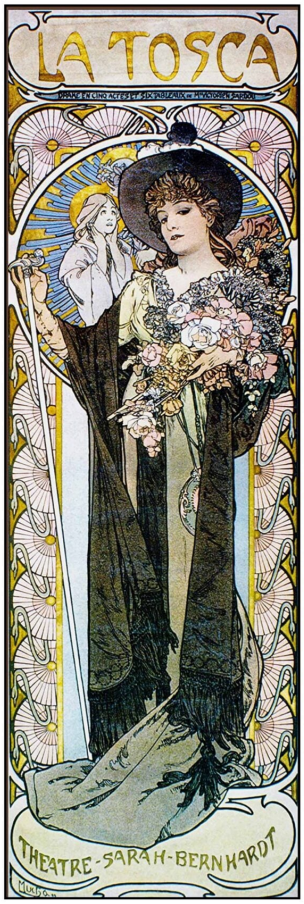
with whom she had two children, Edith and Edward, who later used the fictitious surname, Craig, and who both became renowned theater-directors. Godwin encouraged Terry to act again and she was acclaimed as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* in 1875, a role that she reprised many times over her career (Holyroyd, 2008, p 102).

Sarah Bernhardt was the illegitimate daughter of a Jewish courtesan, and only came to the theater after finishing her education at a convent school. The Duc de Mornay, the half-brother of Napoleoon III and a patron of her mother, suggested that she audition for *Le Conservatoire national de musique et de declamation*. With his influence she was accepted, and studied there between 1860 and 1862. After leaving the conservatoire she acted at the *Odéon* theater but her initial roles were not successful. Though she continued to act, her main support over the next decade came from her life as a courtesan. She counted among her many lovers a Marshall of the French army, a Spanish banker, and a Turkish ambassador (Gottlieb, 2010, p 44). She likely had an affair with Victor Hugo when he directed his play *Ruy Blas* at the Comédie Française in 1872 (Gottleib, 2010, p 61). Though some 40 years her senior Hugo was still susceptible to female charms. Bernhardt had her first major triumph as Maria, Queen of Spain in *Ruy Blas,* and followed this by an acclaimed Phèdre in Racine' tragedy in 1874.

**The Acting Companies**

Bernhardt's subsequent successes at the *Comédie Française* allowed her to obtain backers for her own company in 1880. She put on *La dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas fils, and then took her company on tour to London and the United States. She had affairs with her leading actors and was briefly married to a Greek diplomat. She attracted the attention of Victorien Sardou who wrote several plays for her, notably *Fédora* (1882),

*Théodora* (1884), *La Tosca* (1887) and *Cléopâtre* (1890). She arranged with Alphonse Mucha to produce magnificent art-deco posters for her shows:

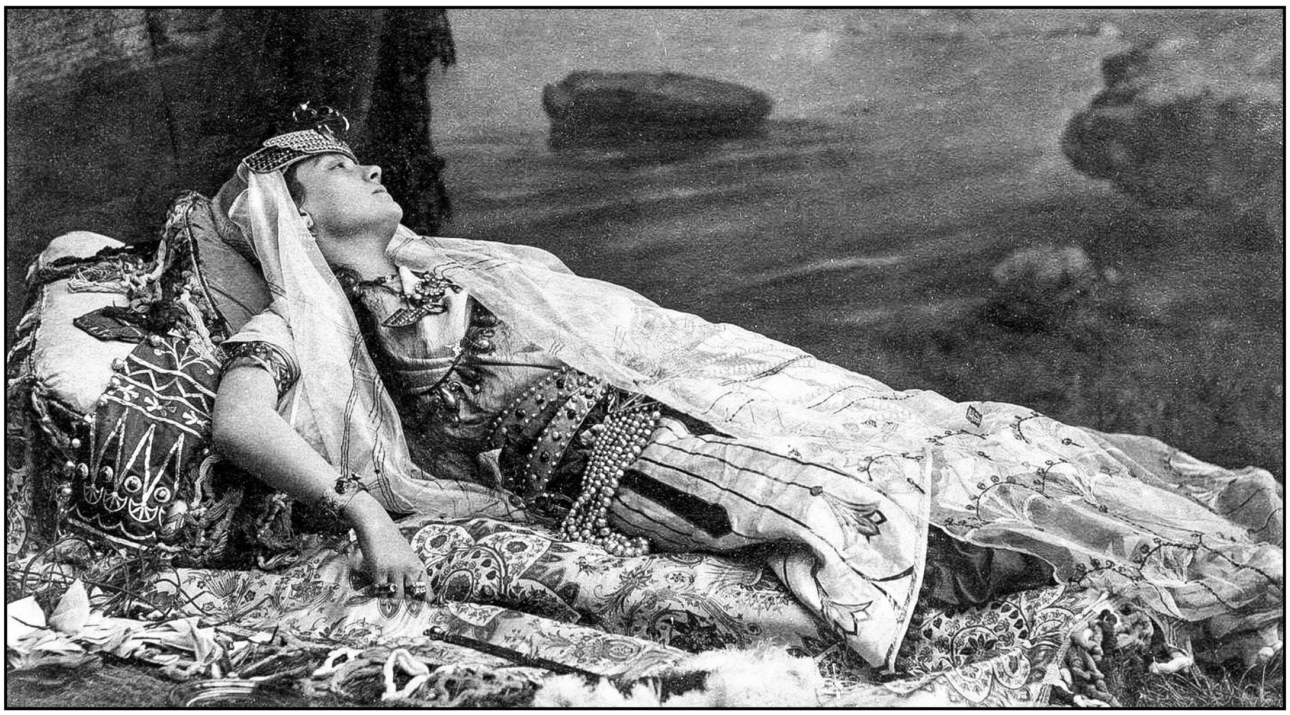



Bernhardt became friends with artists and celebrities: Gustave Doré, the illustrator of Dante, the portraitist Georges Clairin, Edward VII of England when he was Prince of Wales, and Louise Abbéma, an impressionist painter and prominent lesbian. It is unclear how many of her friends were also lovers.

In 1899, the theater built by Baron Haussmann on the Place du Châtelet in Paris was renovated and renamed the *Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt*, a name it retained until the German occupation in 1941 when it was called the *Théâtre de la Cité* because of Bernhardt's Jewish ancestry (Gottlieb, 2010, p 139).

Duse formed her own acting company in 1885. She had a prolonged affair with Arrigo Boito, who was later to serve as

Verdi's librettist for *Otello* and *Falstaff*. Boito provided her with the play *Cleopatre*, a translation of Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra* in 1887. The illustration below shows the competing Cleopatras of Duse and Bernhardt (Rader, 2018, pp 83-84):



In 1895 Duse had an affair with the poet and playwright Gabriele d'Annunzio. He wrote the play *La Gioconda* (1899) for

her. However, later in 1899 when he sent his masterpiece *La città morta,* based on Ancient Greek tragedies, to her rival Sarah Bernhardt, Duse ended their affair. Nevertheless, she later performed in both this play and in d'Annunzio's *Francesca da Rimini* (1901) about the tragic love affair between Francesca and her brother-in-law Paolo Malatesta, as told in Canto 5 of Dante's *Inferno*.

When Duse toured Russia in 1891, she impressed the young Anton Chekhov. Duse was to become the model for Irina Arkadina in *The Seagull* (1895). During her tour of Russia, Duse presented Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. She was particularly fond of the role: Nora, the name of the heroine, is a diminutive of her own name (Rader, 2018, p 103). She later included other Ibsen plays in her repertoire, and visited the playwright in Oslo in 1904. After 1910, Duse had a long relationship with Lina Poletti, a poet, playwright and open Lesbian, but this was likely no more than friendship (Weaver, 1984, pp 286-290).

In 1878 Henry Irving and Ellen Terry formed a partnership to reopen the Lyceum Theatre in London. For the next 20 years, they acted together to great acclaim. Their repertoire centered on Shakespeare – *Hamlet*, *The Merchant of Venice, Rome and Juliet, Macbeth,* and *Much Ado about Nothing* – but they also presented other plays – *Becket* by Tennyson, *Olivia* by W. G. Wills derived from *The Vicar of Wakefield,* and *King Charles I* by William Havard. It is not known whether their relationship extended beyond the theater. Below are woodcuts of Irving and Terry by Terry's son Edward Craig from about 1895.

Terry kept up a long epistolary relationship with Bernard Shaw, who found her an intelligent and witty correspondent. Despite the many letters, however, they only met occasionally. Terry played Lady Cicely Waynefleete in Shaw's *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* in 1906, one of her last important roles. In 1958 a set of eighteen unsigned love poems to Ellen Terry went on auction. Though attributed to Shaw (Werner, 1980), these poems were probably written by Christabel Marshall, who was Terry's secretary for several years. Christabel ultimately changed her name to Christopher Marie St John, and became the romantic partner of Terry's daughter Edy Craig (Holroyd, 2008, pp 321-330).

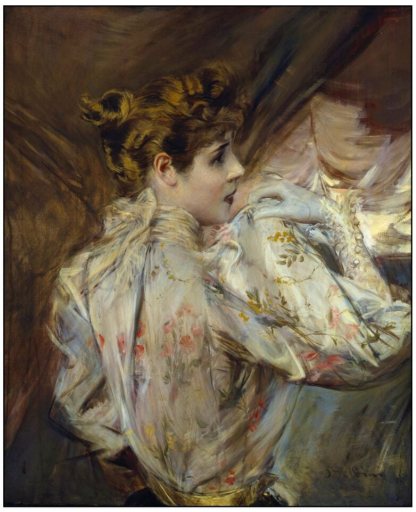
**Portraits**

Bernhardt, Duse and Terry were the beauties of their day. They

were the subject of glamorous portraits such as Michele Gordigiani’s 1896 portrait of Duse and Georges Clairin’s 1876 portrait of Bernhardt:


The following are portraits of Sarah Bernhardt as Cleopatra by Georges Rochegrosse (1890), of the young Ellen Terry by her husband George Watts (1864) and of Eleonora Duse by Giovanni Boldini (1895):





Ilya Repin made a striking charcoal sketch of Duse during her tour of Russia in 1891:

**Photographs**

Nicéphore Niéce took the first photograph in 1822. By the middle of the 19th Century photography had become widespread. Felix Nadar, the first genius of photographic portraiture, produced several images of the young Sarah Bernhardt in the early 1860s.

The following is Adam Begley's description of the portraits:

> Loosely wrapped in a white burnoose, or in a shiny black velvet cloak, both garments voluminous, their folds teasingly suggestive, she leans on a truncated fluted column—a vulgar prop Nadar would have laughed at a decade earlier. It doesn't matter: the eyes are otherwise occupied, caressing her flawless skin, her calm pensive face, her untamed hair. It's not just that she appears to be naked

> under her wrap—the portraits carry an erotic charge that's complicated and enhanced by the withdrawn, private expression and a whisper of melancholy. The air of mystery is especially strong when she's wearing the black velvet and looking off to her right, almost in profile; the focus is slightly blurred, her bright eyes distant and enigmatic. Her sole ornament, a cameo earring, less a decoration than an echo in miniature, draws attention to her elfin ear, deliberately exposed and adding to the impression of nakedness. (Begley 2017, p 110)

Richard Howard's poem *Hommage to Nadar — Sarah Bernhardt* (2004) celebrates both the photographer and his subject:

> Often enough you were naked under the cloak
> in those days; gentlemen drank
> and waited, murmuring deprecations
>
> till the cloak dropped and your arms
> which would dishevel the world — those white serpents,
> Hugo called them — were exposed,
>
> thin as your legs, thin and white, but rusted here,
> then here, the rest white and hard . . .
> Not yet: you have not yet had success on the stage,
>
> and if you were a mother two
> years back, Maurice never knew his father —
> did you? A nun, you wanted
>
> to be a nun, and became a sculptor, one
> craning female torso sent
> each year to the Salon, ardent clay ladies
>
> in postures of possession.
> Mortal will is already your mode, undressed,
> uncombed, probably unwashed —
>
> you are the child he wrote in French for, Oscar

who understood your crying
need and overheard, just thirty years too late,

the voice of Salome, pure
gold bangles on a tin wire pulled to breaking,
and of course the wire did break.

You seem to be regarding, on cue but still
offstage, in the studio,
the resonant hells your talent sanctified

for decades of unbelievers.
and taught your century its lesson, dying
in *La Gloire*, your last *relâche*

attended by a house of fifty thousand:
dazed Paris, unforgiving,
relented for your farewell tour of duty

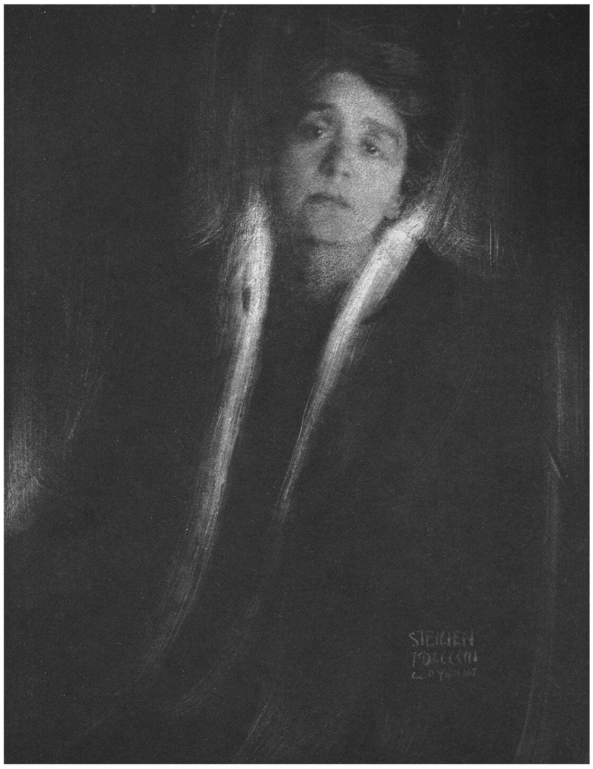
which was to doubt if either
the Heavenly City or that wan shade of it
our dreams have perpetuated

can function, flourish or even form unless
it include its opposite,
unless in heaven there is hell. Divine Sarah.

The poem mentions that Bernhardt was also a competent sculptor. Oscar Wilde wrote *Salomé* in French expressly for Bernhardt although she never played the role. *La Gloire* is likely a late performance in d'Annunzio's *La gloria* which had been translated into French. The theatrical term *en relâche* is used to describe the days when a play is not performed so that the actors can rest. The English idiom is that the theater is "dark." Bernhardt continued working until a few days before her death. "Fifty thousand" is the estimated number who attended her funeral in 1923.

Terry and Duse were also photographed extensively. The

following illustration shows a portrait of Ellen Terry by Julia Margaret Cameron taken in 1864, and a portrait of Eleonora Duse by Edward Steichen taken in 1903. The latter was taken using a soft focus, a style popular at the beginning of the 20th Century but eschewed by later photographers.



**Costumes**

Bernhardt, Terry and Duse all revelled in their costumes. Those of Ellen Terry were particularly striking. Edward Burne-Jones designed her outfits for Guinevere and Lawrence Alma-Tadema for Imogen. The most memorable of her costumes was the "beetle-dress" that she wore as Lady Macbeth. The gown, designed by Alice Laura Comyns-Carr and made by Ada Cort Nettleship, is embellished with green iridescent beetle wing-cases that shimmer under stage lighting. The dress has recently been restored. The illustration below shows the dress

and a painting of Terry as Lady Macbeth by John Singer Sargeant (1888).

**Lithographs**

Lithography was invented in 1796 and come to prominence over the following century as a means for producing inexpensive color prints. William Nicholson published a set of *Twelve Portraits* in 1899: lithographic reproductions of hand-coloured woodcuts. Among those represented was Sarah Bernhardt. Eleonora Duse was included in a second set of portraits which

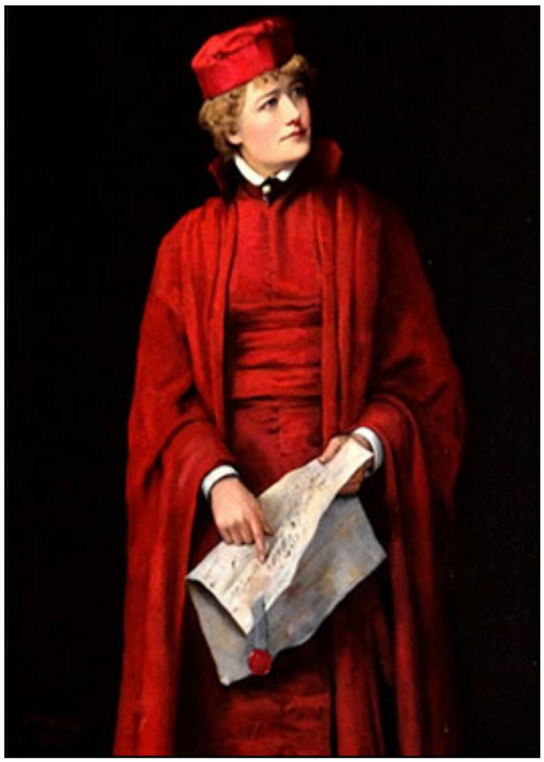
came out in 1902.These portraits are shown below. In 1906 Nicholson produced for the Ellen Terry Jubilee Banquet a lithographic scroll showing all the major roles from her career. The middle section shows Ellen Terry as Lady Teazle from *The School for Scandal* (1877), Olivia from *Olivia* (1878), Ophelia from *Hamlet* (1878), Queen Henrietta Maria from *King Charles I* by William Havard (1879), and Portia from *The Merchant of Venice:*

**Audio Recordings**

In the early years of the 20th Century, it became possible to record the sounds of voices. Both Ellen Terry and Sarah Bernhardt were recorded. Although the recordings are noisy and the studio recordings very different from an actual performance, the listener can get some sense of how they sounded on the stage.

The recording of Ellen Terry giving Portia's speech about mercy was taken in 1911. The words of the speech follow together with a painting by George Baldry of Terry as Portia in an 1895 production. Terry's presentation is restrained but convincing:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/terry-quality-of-mercy-1911.mp3



Ellen Terry as Portia
George Baldry, 1885

The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'T is mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown:
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.

Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* IV:1

I could not find any audio recordings of Eleonora Duse. We must content herself with a description by Arthur Symons, the British critic and poet who lived for a while in Italy and who translated several of d'Annunzio's works:

> And then that voice of hers! It can be sweet or harsh, it can laugh or cry, can be menacing or caressing. And how every word tells! Every word comes to you clearly, carrying exactly its meaning: and, somehow along with the words, an emotion, which you may resolve to ignore, but which will seize on you, which will go through and through you. Trick or instinct, there it is, the power to make you feel intensely; and that is precisely the final test of a great dramatic artist. (Symons, 1926, p 99)

The following is an excerpt from a 1910 recording of Sarah Bernhardt in the role of Phèdre. Phèdre the wife of Theseus has fallen passionately in love with her stepson Hippolytus. She confesses her shame and asks him to punish her with death.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/bernhardt-phedre-1910.mp3

| | |
|---|---|
| Que dis-je? Cet aveu que je viens de te faire,<br>Cet aveu si honteux, le crois-tu volontaire?<br>Tremblante pour un fils que je n'osais trahir,<br>Je te venais prier de ne le point haïr.<br>Faibles projets d'un coeur trop plein de ce qu'il aime!<br>Hélas! je ne t'ai pu parler que de toi-même.<br>Venge-toi, punis-moi d'un odieux amour.<br>Digne fils du héros qui t'a donné le jour,<br>Délivre l'univers d'un monstre qui t'irrite.<br>La veuve de Thésée ose aimer Hippolyte!<br>Crois-moi, ce monstre affreux ne doit point t'échapper.<br>Voilà mon coeur. C'est là que ta main doit frapper.<br>Impatient déjà d'expier son offense,<br>Au-devant de ton bras je le sens qui s'avance.<br>Frappe. Ou si tu le crois indigne de tes coups,<br>Si ta haine m'envie un supplice si doux,<br>Ou si d'un sang trop vil ta main serait trempée,<br>Au défaut de ton bras prête-moi ton épée.<br>Donne! | What is't I say? Think you this vile confession<br>That I have made is what I meant to utter?<br>Not daring to betray a son for whom<br>I trembled, 'twas to beg you not to hate him<br>I came. Weak purpose of a heart too full<br>Of love for you to speak of aught besides!<br>Take your revenge, punish my odious passion;<br>Prove yourself worthy of your valiant sire,<br>And rid the world of an offensive monster!<br>Does Theseus' widow dare to love his son?<br>The frightful monster! Let her not escape you!<br>Here is my heart. This is the place to strike.<br>Already prompt to expiate its guilt,<br>I feel it leap impatiently to meet<br>Your arm. Strike home. Or, if it would disgrace you<br>To steep your hand in such polluted blood,<br>If that were punishment too mild to slake<br>Your hatred, lend me then your sword, if not<br>Your arm. Quick, give't. |

Racine, *Phèdre*, II:5

**In the Words of the Poets.**

The young Oscar Wilde was quite taken by Terry's performance of Portia. The following is his sonnet to the actress. Since I could not find any image of the golden dress, I have paired the sonnet with a portrait of Terry by Forbes-Robertson from about the same time:

**Portia** (To Ellen Terry)

I marvel not Bassanio was so bold
To peril all he had upon the lead,
Or that proud Aragon bent low his head
Or that Morocco's fiery heart grew cold:
For in that gorgeous dress of beaten gold
Which is more golden than the golden sun
No woman Veronese looked upon
Was half so fair as thou whom I behold.
Yet fairer when with wisdom as your shield
The sober-suited lawyer's gown you donned,
And would not let the laws of Venice yield
Antonio's heart to that accursed Jew
O Portia! take my heart: it is thy due:
I think I will not quarrel with the Bond.

Oscar Wilde, 1879

Ellen Terry, 1875
Johnston Forbes-Robertson

Wilde was perhaps even more impressed by Sarah Bernhardt in *Phèdre*. The accompanying photograph was taken by Felix Nadar's son Paul:

Sarah Bernhardt as Phèdre
Paul Nadar, 1893

**Phèdre** (for Sarah Bernhardt)

How vain and dull this common world must seem
To such a One as thou, who should'st have talked
At Florence with Mirandola, or walked
Through the cool olives of the Academe:
Thou should'st have gathered reeds from a green stream
For Goat-foot Pan's shrill piping, and have played
With the white girls in that Phæacian glade
Where grave Odysseus wakened from his dream.

Ah! surely once some urn of Attic clay
Held thy wan dust, and thou hast come again
Back to this common world so dull and vain,
For thou wert weary of the sunless day,
The heavy fields of scentless asphodel,
The loveless lips with which men kiss in Hell.

Oscar Wilde, 1885

The young playwright Edmond Rostand, author of the wildly successful Cyrano de Bergerac (1897) wrote several plays for Sarah Bernhardt, among them *La Samaritaine* (1897), about the Samaritan women who gave up a life of sin to follow Christ, and *l'Aiglon* (Eaglet, 1900) about the Napoleon's son. At a celebratory dinner in 1896 he presented a sonnet in praise of Sarah:

A Sarah Bernhardt

En ce temps sans beauté, seule encore tu nous restes
Sachant descendre, pâle, un grand escalier clair,
Ceindre un bandeau, porter un lis, brandir un fer,
Reine de l'Attitude et Princesse des Gestes!
En ce temps sans folie, ardente, tu protestes!
Tu dis des vers. Tu meurs d'amour. Ton vol se perd.
Tu tends des bras de rêve, et puis des bras de chair,
Et quand Phèdre paraît, nous sommes tous incestes.
Avide de souffrir, tu t'ajoutas des coeurs:
Nous avons vu couler— car ils coulent, tes pleurs!
Toutes les larmes de nos âmes sur tes joues.
Mais aussi tu sais bien, Sarah, que quelquefois
Tu sens furtivement se poser, quand tu joues,
Les lèvres de Shakespeare aux bagues de tes doigts

Edmond Rostand, 1896

To Sarah Bernhardt

In this age without beauty, you alone remain:
You who know how to descend an open staircase
Gird your headband, carry a lily or brandish a sword,
Queen of the Pose and Princess of the Gesture
In this age without passion, you protest with fire!
You declaim your words. You die of love. You fly beyond.
Your arms hold both eternal dreams and mortal flesh,
And when Phèdre appears, we feel her incestuous desire.
Unafraid to suffer, you conquer our hearts:
We have seen you weep – and have felt
Our own grief in the tears on your cheeks.
But you also know, Sarah, how sometimes,
When you play your part, to bring
The lips of Shakespeare to your fingertips.

The sonnet is mainly remembered for the line *Reine de l'Attitude ed Princesse des Gestes.* No one could strike a pose as well as Sarah. The following is the death of *La Dame aux Camélias*, probably from a production in the early 1900s:

In 1907, the American poet Sara Teasdale published four sonnets in honor of Eleonora Duse. The following sonnet about her performance in Francesca da Rimini was set to music by Robert Owen. Below is a performance by soprano Jamie Reimer and pianist Stacie Haneline:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Sonnets-to-Duse-Op.-102_-No.-4.mp3

**To a picture of Eleonora Duse as**
**"Francesca da Rimini"**

Oh flower-sweet face and bended flower-like head!
Oh violet whose purple cannot pale,
Or forest fragrance ever faint or fail,
Or breath and beauty pass among the dead!
Yea, very truly has the poet said,
No mist of years or might of death avail
To darken beauty – brighter thro' the veil
We see the glimmer of its-wings outspread.
Oh face embowered and shadowed by thy hair,
Some lotus blossom on a darkened stream!
If ever I have pictured in a dream
My guardian angel, she is like to this,
Her eyes know joy, yet sorrow lingers there,
And on her lips the shadow of a kiss.

Sara Teasdale, 1907

## Imaginings

It is difficult for us to understand the effect these actresses had on their audiences. We have some general idea:

> Ellen Terry lives on as the eternal girl actress, the symbol of health, youth, and energy, in contrast with Duse, the suffering, mature woman. Between them stands Bernhardt, the creature of passion and power, larger than life and dangerously unpredictable. (Stokes et al, 1988, p 10).

And yet

> Whatever audiences perceived in the work of Bernhardt, Terry and Duse, it was clearly something that took them beyond the immediate and into wider, deeper areas of themselves. This special quality is forever inaccessible to us now, since it died with them and with the time in which they lived. It is also something that challenges historical analysis, just as

> it challenged description by those contemporaries who struggled to express the inexpressible in the restricting language of their reviews and articles. (Stokes et al., 1988, p 11).

So to conclude, I would like to imagine them when they played roles that to me are special. I shall do this in the order of performance. First would be Ellen Terry as Beatrice in the early 1880s. It must have been marvelous to watch her spar with Henry Irving in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

**Much Ado About Nothing**

BEATRICE
I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick: nobody marks you.

BENEDICK
What, my dear Lady Disdain! are you yet living?

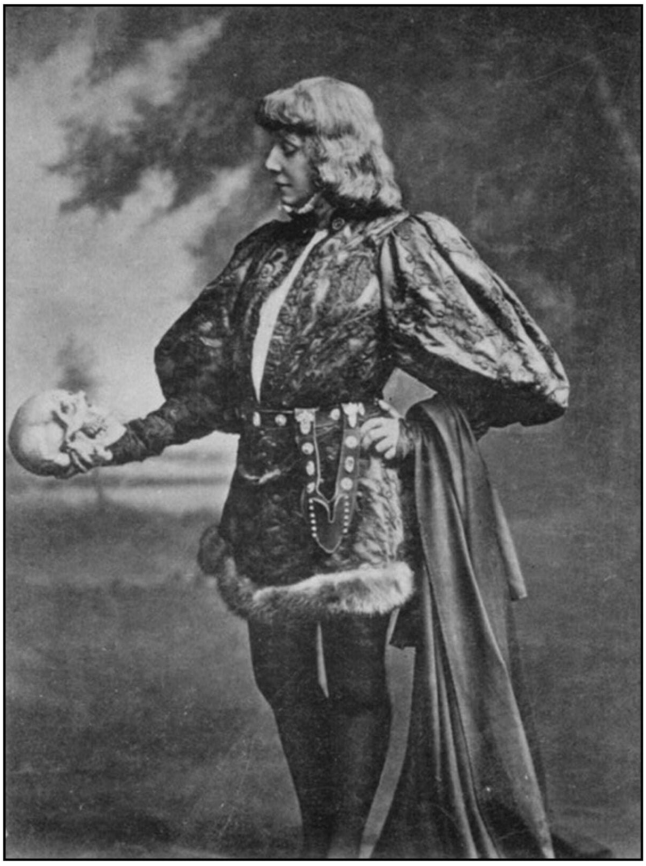
BEATRICE
Is it possible disdain should die while she hath such meet food to feed it as Signior Benedick? Courtesy itself must convert to disdain, if you come in her presence.

Ellen Terry

And then I would have found myself enthralled by the performance of Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet in the 1890s. She thought of Hamlet much as I do: as a man who is determined to do the right thing, who hesitates not from a weakness of will, but because he needs to be certain before he acts. This is completely different from the idea that Hamlet was someone who just could not make up his mind.

## Sarah Bernhardt on Hamlet

I think his character … a perfectly simple one. He is brought face to face with a duty, and he determines to carry it out. All his philosophizing and temporary hesitation does not alter the basis of his character. His resolution swerves, but immediately returns to the channel he has marked out for it. I know this view is quite heterodox, but I maintain it … That there may or may not be something of the woman about Hamlet, is a question which might give rise to a great deal of argument, but I think his character is essentially masculine, and I have endeavoured to represent it as such. (quoted by Huret, 1899, pp 189-190)



And finally, I would have been transfixed by Eleonora Duse as Hedda Gabler in the first few years of the 20th Century.

## Hedda Gabler

HEDDA: At ten o'clock—he will be here. I can see him already—with vine-leaves in his hair—flushed and fearless—

THEA: Oh, I hope he may.

HEDDA: And then, you see—then he will have regained control over himself. Then he will be a free man for all his days.

THEA: Oh God!—if he would only come as you see him now!

HEDDA: He will come as I see him—so, and not otherwise! You may doubt him as long as you please; *I* believe in him. And now we will try—

THEA: You have some hidden motive in this, Hedda!

HEDDA: Yes, I have. I want for once in my life to have power to mould a human destiny.

Eleonora Duse as Hedda

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