Natural Beauty or 'Paint-Painted'? Giovanna Baccelli by Thomas Gainsborough

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Over five weeks in the summer of 1782 more than 55,000 people climbed the narrow stairs to the top floor of Somerset House in London to view that year's Royal Academy Exhibition. Among the portraits, landscapes, and history paintings crowded on the walls, they would have seen a full-length portrait of the popular and talented principal dancer Giovanna Baccelli (1753–1801), painted by Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788), one of the leading artists of the day [**Fig. 5.1**].[1] The dress in which Baccelli is pictured is believed to be her stage costume from the previous season, in which she partnered Auguste Vestris (1760–1842), a star male performer of that time.[2] She is shown as dancing with a white mantilla shawl, having come to rest in fourth position, left leg behind taking her weight, and her right foot pointing forwards.[3] Her right hand takes one end of the shawl behind her back, and her left sweeps the other end away from us and up into the air. Gainsborough has placed her in a landscape, with tall trees shadowing her outstretched arm, and a low horizon that allows high white clouds to frame her upper body She turns towards her audience, with a slight smile on her pale, rouged face. On the ground at her feet lies a tambourine, signalling her as a dancer.[4] Her costume is in the fashionable style of boned bodice, puffed sleeves, and wide skirts underpinned at the sides by paniers, and her face is painted with her stage makeup, a state described as being 'paint-painted'.

On 1 May 1782, the reviewer of the exhibition for the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* wrote:

> […] in the character of an Italian opera Dancer, the artist was not only obliged to vivify and embellish, but if he would be thought to copy the original, to *lay on his*

[1] For a full catalogue entry on this portrait see Hugh Belsey, *Thomas Gainsborough: The Portraits, Fancy Pictures and Copies after Old Masters,* 2 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), I, pp. 44-46.
[2] Elizabeth Einberg, *Gainsborough's Giovanna Baccelli* (London: Tate Gallery 1976), p. 13, suggests that the costume in the portrait was that used in the ballet *Les Amans Surpris*. However, in her own chapter in this volume, Judith Milhous suggests that the costume used is, in fact, the one used for *Nancy at Court*. See generally also Hugh Belsey and Susan Sloman, *Gainsborough and the Theatre* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2018).
[3] Baccelli is elsewhere described as wearing an apron; see, for example, Einberg, Gainsborough's Giovanna Baccelli, p. 13, and Belsey, Thomas Gainsborough, I, p. 46. However, the amount of material involved is great, and were it to be a Mantilla shawl, it would account for both the lace, and the position of her hands.
[4] The tambourine 'seems to have served almost exclusively as an attribute in painting for female dancing', by alluding to physical activity: Raymond Leppert, *Music and Image: Domesticity, Ideology and Socio-Cultural Form in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 153.

> *colour thickly:* in this he has succeeded, for the face of this admirable dancer is evidently *paint-painted* […].[5]

Gainsborough was known for his naturalistic portraits of the aristocracy and his ability to produce a good likeness, and this portrait shows a performer for whom costume and makeup are her 'natural' state.[6] For society at that time the visual held primacy, and ideally, how one looked indicated who one was.[7] Gainsborough, by then an established artist, was exploring more complex poses and had developed a renewed interest in Watteau, for whom dancing was a key theme.[8] Gainsborough took the opportunity to introduce a sense of movement into the painting, employing a broader and more experimental style. Cleaning of the picture when it arrived at the Tate in 1975 revealed the light, rapid brushstrokes, almost as thin as watercolour in places, that characterised Gainsborough's style.[9]

There are several works of art through which one can construct a view of Baccelli, her character, and her career, partly as a dancer but primarily as the mistress of John Frederick Sackville, 3rd Duke of Dorset (1745-1799) who commissioned her image from some of the most prominent artists of the day. Gainsborough's portrait gives us an image of Baccelli as a well-known and successful principal dancer, a professional woman. An explicit nude by Giovanni Battista Locatelli (1713–1785), sculpted in about 1780, gives us Baccelli as a mistress, the long-term lover of the Duke of Dorset, a woman presented for the appreciation of men [**Fig. 5.2**]; and Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), with his customary emphasis on the theatrical, gives us Baccelli in 1783 as a Bacchante, a woman who inhabited the dubious world of the theatre [see **Fig. 5.3**].

Giovanna Baccelli

Giovanna Francesca Antonia Guiseppe Zanerini, known as Baccelli, was one of the most popular female dancers of her day. She came from an Italian family of performers and took her mother's name, Baccelli, but her fluent French suggests that she may have trained

[5] *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 1 May 1782.
[6] Michael Rosenthal, *The Art of Thomas Gainsborough* (London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 33.
[7] Aileen Ribeiro, 'A Most Extraordinary Figure, Handsome and Bold: Gainsborough's Portrait of Ann Ford, 1760', in *Thomas Gainsborough and the Modern Woman*, ed. by Benedict Leca (London: Giles, 2010), pp. 108–40 (p. 111)
[8] Christine Riding, catalogue description for 'Giovanna Baccelli' in *Gainsborough*, ed. by Michael Rosenthal and Martin Myrone (London: Tate Publishing, 2002) p. 136, no. 57.
[9] Elizabeth Einberg, *Gainsborough's Giovanna Baccelli* (London: Tate Gallery, 1976), pp. 12–13. For a discussion of Gainsborough's style in this portrait see Benedict Leca, 'A Favourite among the Demireps', in *Gainsborough and the Modern Woman*, ed. by idem (London: Giles, 2010), pp. 43–104 (p. 77).

originally in France.[10] In London she moved with ease among the French dancers and Italian singing stars at the first King's Theatre in the Haymarket, known as the 'Italian opera house'. She made her début there in 1774, dancing the Rose in *Le Ballet des fleurs*, with newspaper commenting on her 'brilliancy of execution'.[11] This led to a career as a principal dancer which lasted until 1786. Between 1776 and 1783 she also appeared several times as a featured dancer at the Paris Opéra, and later returned to her birthplace in Venice to dance at the Teatro San Benedetto.[12] Her career spanned a time when ballet, under the auspices of French dancing masters such as Jean Georges Noverre (1727-1810), was developing from an interlude between the acts of an opera to an independent art form in its own right.

As a popular and talented dancer, moving in the exotic company of foreign performers at the opera house, Baccelli could expect her activities to be followed in the London newspapers. In particular, her dancing was followed by the *Public Advertiser*, which often singled her out for praise.[13] The *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser* did likewise.[14] In general, however, commentary consisted mainly of reports, and the content of these was not above suspicion; it was known that performers and promoters often used friends to produce puffs about them, or to criticize their rivals.[15] But much attention was also paid to Baccelli's private life; her status as a high-profile performer increased this coverage, and together with a profliferation of her images, boosted her position in a 'culture of celebrity'.[16] Even so, it is notable that at a time of much biting criticism aimed at female stage performers, press attitudes towards Baccelli seem to have been relatively benign, and remained so even when, in 1779, it became known that she was the mistress of the Duke of Dorset.[17] Away from the personal details, however, the press reporting does allow us to reconstruct the trajectory of her career.

By the December of her first season, her chaconne, a dance at the end of the opera that demanded virtuosic technique and stamina, was deemed by one London newspaper to be

[10] *BDA*, I (1973), pp. 191–93.
[11] *Public Advertiser*, 22 November 1774.
[12] For a summary of Baccelli's career and roles see Jessica Griffin, 'Giovanna Baccelli', in *International Dictionary of Ballet*, ed. by Marta Bremsa (Detroit: St James Press, 1993), I, pp. 72–73.
[13] See the *Public Advertiser*: 22 November 1774, 24 January 1780, 31 March 1781, 30 April 1782, and 25 March 1786.
[14] See the *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*: 29 May 1777, 26 February 1781, 26 November 1782, 9 February 1785, and 3 April 1786.
[15] Judith Milhous, 'Vestris-Mania and the Construction of Celebrity: Auguste Vestris in London, 1780–81', *Harvard Library Bulletin,* n.s. 5 (1994–95), pp. 30–64 (p. 37). For a discussion of performers and self-promotion see John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 274.
[16] Michael Rosenthal, 'Public Reputation and Image Control in Late-Eighteenth-Century Britain', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 7 (2006), pp. 69–93.
[17] Ivor Guest, *The Ballet of the Enlightenment: The Establishment of the Ballet d'Action in France 1770-1793* (London: Dance Books, 1996), p. 205.

'exceedingly brilliant'.[18] This dance seems to have become a favourite in her repertoire and was reported a few years later as 'noble', 'elegant' and 'graceful'.[19] Baccelli was soon dancing alongside the principle dancer Madame Simonet (fl. 1776-1791), wife of the dancing master Louis Simonet (fl. 1765-1817):

> […] we believe no theatre, not even Paris, ever saw two such serious dancers performing on the stage together, as Madame Simonet, and Mademoiselle Baccelli; the pas de deux between them excels almost any thing we have seen.[20]

Baccelli's popularity in London seems to have grown rapidly. Even the fact that she did not appear on stage until after Christmas in the 1779-80 season, does not seem to have provoked adverse comment in the press:

> The dances, particularly the second and the last, were well devised, and executed in a masterly manner by the principal dancers, Mad. Simonet, Mons. Favre Guiardele, Mr Slingsby, Signora Tantini, and Mad. Baccelli. The latter was received, for her first time this season, with that enthusiastic applause which is so flattering to the performer, when, as is here the case, it is founded on the strictest justice.[21]

No reason for her absence from the stage was stated; possibly it was because she had given birth to a son by the duke.[22]

One of the highlights of Baccelli's career was the 1780-81 season when the dancers Gaetan Vestris (1729-1808) and his son Auguste (1760-1842) arrived in England. The twenty-year-old Vestris junior burst upon the London stage with an athletic and expressive style of dancing unlike anything that had been seen before. The fever of excitement that he engendered, the full houses crowding to see this beautiful young prodigy, created the first real dance celebrity, whose fame spread beyond the cognoscenti to those with no real

[18] *Public Advertiser*, 7 December 1774. For the chaconne see Rebecca Harris-Warwick, 'Chaconne', *IED*, II, pp. 97-99.
[19] *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser,* 24 January 1780.
[20] *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, 29 May 1777.
[21] *Whitehall Evening Post*, 22–25 January 1780.
[22] Robert Sackville-West describes the son as having been born 'sometime in 1779' which might fit with this gap in her career. See *Inheritance: The Story of Knole and the Sackvilles* (London: Bloomsbury 2010) p. 132.

understanding of dance.[23] As his dance partners, Baccelli and Madame Simonet were also recognised for their part in his success:

> The new dancer, equally surprised us by his unparallel'd Agility and Strength of Body; whilst the Gracefulness of his Attitudes made us forget all we had seen before of the Kind. […] He was powerfully seconded by Mademoiselle Baccelli and Madame Simonet.[24]

As already mentioned, Baccelli's costume depicted in Gainsborough's portrait is from the previous season, when Auguste's début, had created such excitement and thunderous applause.[25] Bacelli would partner the young Vestris in every one of the four ballets created by Vestris senior; they were also paired in two of the four created by the ballet-master of the King's Theatre, Louis Simonet.[26] The exciting visitors from France also seem to have brought out the best in both Baccelli and Madame Simonet:

> Great praise is due to the two Vestris; but as we are *womanlishly* inclined, we paid greater Attention to the inimitable Baccelli, and the very graceful Simonet; nor do we remember to have seen them to so great an advantage.[27]

Ninette à la cour was the first three-act *ballet d'action* staged at the King's Theatre and, viewed alongside *Médée et Jason* staged the next month, gives an impression of Baccelli's strengths as a dancer. In both productions she danced alongside Madame Simonet as the other principal female performer, and in each it was Simonet who took the more serious role, with Baccelli in the demi-character role. This is not to imply that Baccelli could not act, but that her innate charm and gracefulness made her more suitable for the lighter roles that demanded greater spontaneity.

In *Ninette à la cour* Baccelli took the leading role of the eponymous country girl spotted by a prince and taken to his court. In the central scene Ninette, dressed in unaccustomed finery, struggles to dance in the wide hoops, headdress, and heavy jewellery of

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[23] Milhous, 'Vestris-Mania', pp. 35, 43–44.
[24] *Public Advertiser*, 18 December 1780.
[25] Milhous, 'Vestris-Mania', p. 35.
[26] For a description of how the theatre handled the tensions between visiting and resident dancing masters see Milhous, 'Vestris-Mania' p. 39–41. For a description of the 1780–81 Opera season see Curtis Price, Judith Milhous, Robert D. Hume, *Italian Opera in Late Eighteenth-Century London: The King's Theatre, Haymarket 1778–1791* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1995) pp. 451–61.
[27] *Public Advertiser*, 19 March 1781.

her court dress; this was a performance that demanded great skill in acting and perfect comic timing:

> We wish it were in the power of words to do ample justice to Mademoiselle Baccelli, whose part in the ballet was the more difficult as she was obliged to dance with that characteristic awkwardness which could not but sit uneasy on so accomplished a dancer.[28]

The ballet *Médée et Jason,* a classical myth of thwarted love and jealous revenge, with two strong parts for female dancers, provided one of the sensations of the season. It was presented as an afterpiece to the Italian opera *Piramo e Tisbe* with the audience having earlier enjoyed a lighter entr'acte piece entitled *Les Caprices de Galathée* in which:

> Mademoiselle Baccelli was truly admirable; but she soon put it out of our Power to determine which was her *Forte*, the Comic or [the] Serious Dance; for, after having enchanted us in the former, she wound up our Wonder and Distress to the highest Pitch in the latter, by acting the Part of Creusa, Medæa's rival, and the Victim of that Monster's Jealousy.[29]

London audiences, renowned for rioting in the theatre as a way of expressing their displeasure, were generally quieter at the opera house.[30] During the Vestris' début season in 1781 there were two riots at the King's Theatre, one occasioned by massive overcrowding at the benefit for Vestris junior, and the other by the non-appearance of Baccelli in the first dance, *Les Amans surpris*, on 31 May. She was unwell and, wishing to give her best in the rigorous role as the nymph Creuse in the second ballet (*Médée et Jason)*, she stood down from the first dance. The lack of an announcement, an accepted custom when a performer was to be replaced, led to explosive disappointment from her supporters, which was stilled only when the manager - accompanied by Vestris father and son - appeared on stage to offer an apology; the second ballet *Medée et Jason* would be given with Baccelli as it had been advertised.[31]

At the end of the season, Baccelli danced in *Appelles et Campaspe*, resulting in a report that hints at the audience's preference for seeing her in demi-character roles:

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[28] *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*, 26 February 1781.
[29] *Public Advertiser*, 31 March 1781. For a description of the 1780-81 Opera season see Price, Milhous, and Hume, *Italian Opera in Late Eighteenth-Century London*, pp. 249–59.
[30] Milhous, 'Vestris-Mania', p. 43.
[31] *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*, 31 May and 1 June 1781. For a fuller account, see the *Whitehall Evening Post*, 2–5 June 1781 (a news report dated 4 June).

> If an amendment might be offered, it would be bringing forward the Baccelli in the latter character [Campaspe], for which the grace and elegant symmetry of her person seem particularly to point her out […] although no disparagements can be offered to the talents of the Simonet, surely her merits as an actress furnish but a feeble substitute to the youthful charms and more pleasing powers of the Baccelli.[32]

The next season saw the arrival in London of Noverre, the creator of *ballet d'action*, bringing with him a group of dancers to augment the company at the King's Theatre. One of these dancers, the young Mademoiselle Théodore (1759-1799), began to appear alongside Madame Simonet, who was a former pupil of Noverre, with Baccelli consigned to more minor roles. Noverre's recent resignation from the Paris Opéra after a traumatic season, must have left him inclined to rely on familiar faces. The audience was obviously excited by these new stars, yetit seems that the charm and charisma of Baccelli still won the day for some in a performance of *Adèle de Ponthieu*:

> In the pas de Trois, with Nivelon, Theodore, and Baccelli, the Preference is certainly due to Baccelli; and in so saying, we mean no more than that *Grace* in Dancing is preferable to *Agility*.[33]

Nor was Baccelli entirely side-lined; she formed a lasting friendship with the principle dancer Pierre Gardel (1758-1840), with whom she danced several times during the season, introducing him into English high society. This may have led to her invitation to dance at the Paris Opéra in 1782, where she was met with an enthusiastic reception. During her visits to France the London newspapers followed Baccelli with interest, publishing gossipy reports on her progress from English correspondents in Paris:

> Mademoiselle Baccelli made her first appearance yesterday. […] If you consider that I am here the echo of all the Parisian amateurs, and how much it costs a Frenchman to acknowledge that there is nothing above Gallic excellence, at least, in the important art of dancing, you will wonder at so unanimous applause bestowed on an Italian dancer; yet to save l'honneur du nom Francois, it is said, that the picture would not have been half so pleasing, were it not for a few gentle touches from the all-vivifying pencil

[32] *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*, 7 June 1782.
[33] *Public Advertiser,* 30 April 1782.

> of Gardel junior. As I have no national partiality, I care not how it is; but this I will say, that, since the retreat of Mademoiselle Heinel, no woman has got or deserved more applause, than your quondam and favourite Baccelli.[34]

Back in England she was welcomed on stage with comments on how her technique had improved after her season in Paris, which had included classes with her friend Pierre Gardel:

> the re-appearance of that excellent performer [Baccelli], after so long an absence from a stage where she always was, and deserved to be welcome, was the more acceptable to the lovers of graceful and animated dancing. That she is astonishingly improved, and by her example verifies the truth of the remark, of which the French are so proud, tho' of a very light importance, that in point of dancing, the Paris school 'can perfect perfection itself'.[35]

The *Public Advertiser*'s reports of Baccelli's dancing on the London stage give a picture of a performer who was well loved for her demi-character roles, but who also displayed the elegant attributes of *dance noble* even if the suggestion always remained that she excelled in roles where her natural grace and charm were to the fore.

Among the press reports of Baccelli's performances are occasional jibes – such as a, probably imagined, rivalry with Mademoiselle Theodore or Mademoiselle Rossi.[36] However, these feel more like the petulant outbursts of her rivals than genuine criticism, when set against the overall tone of enthusiasm generally displayed. The reports overall suggest a well-loved performer, someone who not only had charisma but a charming and warm personality, and who engendered a reciprocal warmth and loyalty from her audience. This was true not only in London, but also in the gossipy reports published in England on her life in Paris where in 1782, she accompanied the Duke of Dorset when he was made ambassador to France, and in the hopeful predictions of her return to the London stage. The place Baccelli had in her audience's affections is illustrated most clearly in the 1781 satirical poem *An Heroic Epistle*, which uses the device of the discovery of the 'lost communication', here

[34] *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser,* 26 November 1782. For a brief outline of the career of Pierre Gardel (1758-1840), see Michael Burden and Jennifer Thorp (eds), *The Works of Monsieur Noverre Translated from the French: Noverre, his Circle, and the English* Lettres sur la danse (Hillside NY: Pendragon Press, 2014), Appendix 2 (Dancers named in MacMahon's translation), p. 516.
[35] *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*, 3 April 1786.
[36] See, for example, the *London Courant and Westminster Chronicle*, 1 October 1781, and *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*, 31 March 1783.

purporting to be one from Vestris senior to his mistress Anne Heinel, to lambast Vestris junior for his arrogant behaviour. However, the highly critical author – the publication was widely attributed to John Nott – could not bring himself to insult Baccelli, referring to her as:

> Sweet *Baccelli,* with a grace untold,
> *Baccelli* form'd in Nature's choicest mould! [37]

Baccelli at the Royal Academy

For many of the viewers, the first sight of Gainsborough's portrait must have been disconcerting. Although Baccelli is posed before a group of trees, a familiar Gainsborough trope, she is obviously a performer wearing a costume and makeup, a style not usually associated with Gainsborough. Late eighteenth-century London saw the production of a growing number of images of women, through portraits and prints.[38] The relatively new format of a public exhibition had also increased interest in portraits, especially of prominent figures, and a contemporary image of the exhibition by Daniel Dodd in 1784 [**Illustration 5:4**] shows a crowded audience, as interested in each other as the pictures on the walls.

Having climbed the steep stairs to the top of the building, the audience would enter the 'great room' to find a visual cacophony of paintings lit by the skylight. By 1782 the high ambitions expressed at the founding of the Royal Academy, to create a British School based on the high art of history painting, had succumbed to the highly competitive and entrepreneurial spirit of the age.[39] What brought visitors back each year was a display that was intensely theatrical and full of novelty, not least in the growing popularity of viewing portraits of public figures.[40] A German visitor, witing for readers at home, described the atmosphere:

> During May Somerset House was often so crowded with gentlemen and ladies, with pretended connoisseurs and supercilious critics, who all come to stare at the pictures, that in the middle of the day some ladies are ready

[37] *An Heroic Epistle from Monsieur Vestris, Sen: in England, to Mademoiselle Heinel, in France: with Notes* (London: R. Faulder, 1781), p. 5-6 and 21 (lines 191–92); see the edition in Michael Burden (ed.), *London Opera Observed 1711-1844*, 5 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013), II, pp. 297–307.
[38] Cindy McCreery, *The Satirical Gaze: Prints of Women in Late Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 14.
[39] David H. Solkin, 'Preface: "The Exhibition"', in *Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House 1780–1836*, ed. by David H. Solkin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p. xi.
[40] David H. Solkin, 'Introduction: "This Great Man of Genius": The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780-1836', in *Art on the Line*, ed. Solkin (2001), pp. 1–8 (p. 5).

> to faint, on account of the heat in the rooms, and the powerful perfumes of the odiferous company with which they are filled.[41]

Many of the audience would recognise the public figures being shown, having viewed them on the stage or in the audience at the theatre or the opera, or glimpsed them in a carriage as they arrived for state events. At the academy, they were not only present but also static, and juxtaposed with others, a society in microcosm.

The pictures were crowded on the walls, hung edge to edge as if a mosaic [**Fig. 5.4**]. For those who had undertaken the Grand Tour through France and Italy, this style of hanging would also have been familiar from the galleries on the continent. The order in which they were hung had more to do with size than with subject, with the smaller paintings lower down, and the larger ones above. Full length portraits and other huge paintings had their lower edge supported on a narrow shelf running around the room at just above head level, creating a line that divided the room into two horizontal zones. The pictures in the lower half could only be seen by those standing close by, thus it was of great advantage to an artist to have his work hung, as it were, 'above the line'.

Historically portraits had been for the élite: they were about establishing family and status, and for most would be seen only by those visiting the grand houses of the wealthy. Portraits of women were about recording and establishing their status within their expected domestic role as wives and mothers.[42] The public exhibition allowed people from a wider range of classes to view these images of the aristocracy and public figures. In the gallery, a portrait held the same status as the person depicted in it, and to see members of the upper classes hung alongside members of the demi-monde was problematic.[43] The social hierarchies that operated in the public world held true within the walls of the Academy, leading to discomfort from unexpected juxtapositions brought about by the hanging of the paintings. The portrait of Baccelli and reactions to it highlight this unease: she is not in the theatre, being viewed by an audience that is separate from her, but hanging on a gallery wall next to those who would consider themselves as her superiors. In 1786, the *Morning Herald* reported that French visitors to the Royal Academy exhibition were 'shocked at the

[41] Frederick Wendeborn, *A View of England Towards the Close of the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson 1791), II, p. 197.
[42] There was an increasing demand in London for portraits of women, see McCreery, *The Satirical Gaze*, p. 15.
[43] Rosenthal, 'Public Reputation and Image Control', p. 75.

indelicacy of placing the portraits of notorious prostitutes, triumphing as it were in vice, close to the pictures of women of rank and virtue'. [44]

For those who could afford it, a portrait was a way of shaping their public image. It was often the lives of performers outside the theatre that held the public attention, more than their abilities within it, and in the same year that Gainsborough painted Baccelli he also painted a portrait of the actress Mary Robinson [**Fig. 5.5**].[45] Robinson's choice of Gainsborough was a deliberate move to reclaim her status after a disastrous affair with the Prince of Wales, which left her penniless and with her reputation in ruins.[46] She is depicted in a landscape of trees, similar to Baccelli, the spurned but devoted woman, holding a miniature of the prince which he gave her, and accompanied by a dog, a signifier of faithfulness. Such detail pertaining to the sitter's situation suggests a close conversation between artist and subject, a mutual agreement. This image attempts to counter the many vicious and cruel cartoons of Robinson and the prince, published after their affair, a cruelty that intensified when she became the mistress of the soldier Colonel Banastre Tarleton (1754-1833).[47]

In a society with an increasingly pronounced sense of the visual, formal portraits actually amplified the importance of these women of the demi-monde.[48] The actress, adept at receiving and manipulating the audience's gaze, stared out from the gallery wall and could exercise a powerful hold over the public imagination.

There are no hanging diagrams for the 1782 exhibition, so it is not possible to state precisely where Baccelli's portrait was hung. However, the first page of the catalogue, published to accompany the exhibition, states that the pictures are numbered as they are placed in the room, the first number being over the door.[49] The numbers ran from ceiling to floor, and left to right, so it is difficult to imagine which paintings hung alongside her. The Royal Academy catalogues gave names and titles only to members of the Royal family, the others were simply listed as *Portrait of a Lady* or *Portrait of a Gentleman*. *Madame Baccelli* appears on page 11 as picture number 230, with *Portrait of a Gentleman* by H. Robinson, as number 229 and *An Old Man's Head in the Character of an Apostle* by J. Wright, as 231. If they wished,

[44] *Morning Herald*, 9 May 1786.
[45] McCreery, *The Satirical Gaze*, p. 16.
[46] For Mary Robinson's biography see Paula Byrne *Perdita: The life of Mrs Robinson,* (London: Harper Collins 2004) and details of her affairs with the Prince of Wales and Colonel Tarleton see Stephen Conway, 'Banastre Tarleton', *ODNB*, LIII, pp. 784–86.
[47] For example, see: James Gillray, *The Thunderer*, 20 August 1782; London, British Museum 6166.
[48] Robyn Asleson, 'Introduction', in *Notorious Muse: The Actress in British Art and Culture, 1776–1812*, ed. by Robyn Asleson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 1–21 (p. 6).
[49] *The Exhibition of the Royal Academy* (London: T Cadell, 1782). The Royal Academy archive at Burlington House, Picadilly, London, holds copies of every R.A. summer exhibition catalogue since the first one in 1769.

visitors could consult lists in the newspapers that identified the sitters, and part of the pleasure for the viewers was matching these announcements in the papers to the figures that they saw on the walls. For example, painting number 204 in the 1782 catalogue, listed as *Portrait of a Lady* by Joshua Reynolds, is named by the *Painter's Mirror* as Lady G. Cavendish.[50] Number 130, however, is listed as *Madame Baccelli*; it would seem that while respectable members of society could preserve some semblance of anonymity on the walls of the gallery, a performer had already lost hers by appearing on the stage and so was not entitled to such consideration.

Another part of the build-up to the Royal Academy exhibition was to encourage speculation in the press before the exhibition opened. Since its beginning in 1769, the summer exhibition had quickly become part of the social round, and each year in the weeks before the press tantalised the public with hints at what might be seen that year. In 1782 it was reported that Gainsborough would show portraits of the Duke of Dorset and Giovanna Baccelli, and also of the Prince of Wales, Colonel Tarleton, and Mary Robinson.[51] These two groups of personalities, known to be conducting illicit affairs, could be expected to draw a crowd. However, just before the opening, Gainsborough withdrew the Duke of Dorset and Mary Robinson. Whatever Gainsborough's feelings for Baccelli, it would seem that the duke was not prepared to undergo the public scrutiny (and possibly mockery) that would be occasioned by the juxtaposition of his image with that of the dancer on the gallery walls.[52] Similarly, the Prince of Wales perhaps did not wish to have his portrait hung alongside that of his former lover, possibly explaining why Robinson's portrait was also withdrawn. Yet such sensitivities on the part of Gainsborough proved futile as Joshua Reynold's portraits of both Mary Robinson and Tarleton were shown at the exhibition, and the Prince of Wales was still placed in an embarrassing conjunction with this couple.[53] Reynolds, as President of the Royal Academy, may have had more resistance to outside pressure over his choice of entries.

Gainsborough may also have withdrawn his portrait of Mrs Robinson because the press did not consider that he had achieved a suitable 'likeness'. A portrait was more than the representation of the physical features of that person; it also encompassed their status and social acceptability. Portraits are themselves a type of performance, and when they

[50] *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*, 1 May 1782.
[51] For example, see the *Public Advertiser,* 23 March 1782.
[52] Gill Perry, 'The Spectacle of the Muse: Exhibiting the Actress at the Royal Academy', in *Art on the Line*, ed. by David H. Solkin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 111–25 (p. 113–14).
[53] Rosenthal, 'Public Reputation and Image Control', p. 69–91 (p. 77).

represented a performer they became particularly ambiguous.[54] Gainsborough presented the actress Mrs Robinson as a beautiful and demure woman, but at that moment, as an actress and courtesan, she was far from either; the portrait thus could not be seen as a 'likeness'. As the 1 May 1782 *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* commentary cited above pointed out, the only way that Gainsborough could produce a good likeness of Baccelli, also a performer, was to paint her in her stage makeup. The contrast between the portraits of Robinson and Baccelli was noted by the *Public Advertiser*; after passing on gossip about well-known courtesans and noting that Mrs Robinson, known as 'Perdita', had been the subject of several portraits, it gives a comparison between Gainsborough's depiction of her and of Baccelli:

> The picture of Perdita has been mentioned as *not* being a likeness; the Baccelli is like the original, but it is an *ugly* likeness; – Circumstances which, being referred to one of the Personages above-mentioned, entitle the Painter to the *Moral* and *Prudential* Praise.[55]

A 'moral' likeness was one that signalled to the viewer the woman's real status in life, whatever that might be – there is no visible indication that Robinson is a courtesan.

Gainsborough seems to have painted women as he found them, without recourse to theatrical role-play as employed by Reynolds.[56] Gainsborough's portrait of Baccelli clearly signalled her profession as a performer; his emphasis on her white makeup and rouge may also have been a riposte to persistent criticism of his use of colour when depicting women's faces, in an explicit flouting of the rule that expected demure feminity in the depiction of women.[57] Gainsborough's Baccelli could be seen as a 'good *moral* likeness' because there was no pretence as to her profession.[58] The question of 'likeness' also appears in the review of the exhibition by the *St James's Chronicle*:

> This favourite Performer has been the Object of so much deserved Admiration, she is usually seen with so many Advantages from Dress etc. that it would be difficult for any Painter to do her Justice in the opinion of her friends. Mr Gainsborough, by not aiming at more than Justice, has

[54] Gill Perry, Joseph Roach, and Shearer West, 'Introduction', in *The First Actresses*, ed. by idem (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2011), p. 9–31 (p. 27).
[55] *Public Advertiser,* 19 April 1782. Mrs Robinson was referred to in the press as Perdita after the character in *The Winter's Tale* that she was playing when first spotted by the Prince of Wales in 1779. He was given the name Florizel.
[56] Rosenthal, *The Art of Thomas Gainsborough,* p. 162.
[57] Benedict Leca, '"A Favourite Among the Demi-reps": Thomas Gainsborough and the Modern Woman', in *Thomas Gainsborough and the Modern Woman*, ed. by Benedict Leca, pp. 43–104 (p. 91).
[58] *Public Advertiser*, 2 May 1782.

> hardly given a Likeness. The Figure, however, is as the Original, light airy and elegant.[59]

The *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser* simply told its readers that *Madame Baccelli* was in Gainsborough's 'best style'.[60]

Baccelli as a Mistress

Baccelli's position as a performer, as well as the mistress of a member of the aristocracy, brought an ambivalence to her social position. The second depiction of her is the plaster sculpture by the Italian artist Giovanni Baptista Locatelli, who lived in London between 1778 and 1790, and whose name appears in the 1782 Royal Academy catalogue linked with four exhibited works [**Fig. 5.2**]. He presents us with Baccelli as a seductive woman – a woman displayed for the appreciation of men, and one who held the duke's affection for more than ten years. She lies on her front, her body sinking into the cushions of a rumpled bed. Leaning forward on her arms she turns her head slightly towards the viewer, thus revealing her right breast, with a slight smile on her face. By 1779 the duke had openly acknowledged Baccelli as his mistress, and she began to be absent from the stage for longer periods than might be expected for a dancer of her standing.[61] Their relationship lasted a decade, and throughout this time Baccelli seems to have been faithful to the duke, although he had other mistresses during their time together.[62]

John Frederick Sackville, 3rd Duke of Dorset (1745-1799) had inherited the title from his uncle in 1769, sharing with him his love of music and opera.[63] Like many aristocrats of the period, Sackville undertook the Grand Tour, bringing back many works of art with which he began to restore his estate at Knole in Sevenoaks, Kent. As a connoisseur and collector of art, he was also a patron of several living artists, including Reynolds, Opie, Humphry, Romney, Hoppner and Gainsborough.[64] However, he was a dilettante and a large part of his life was taken up with social activities. An attractive man, he also collected women, notably Nancy Parsons, Mrs Elizabeth Armistead, and Lady Betty Hamilton (Countess of Derby).[65] But it was Baccelli with whom he had the longest relationship, ending it in 1789, when his

[59] *St James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 30 April–2 May 1782.
[60] *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser,* 1 May 1782.
[61] Karen Eliot, *Dancing Lives: Five Female Dancers from the Ballet d'Action to Merce Cunningham* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), p. 10.
[62] Caitlyn Lehmann, 'Representing Baccelli', *Dance Chronicle*, 31 (2008), pp. 84–87 (p. 85).
[63] See Sackville-West, *Inheritance,* pp. 127–42.
[64] Einberg, *Gainsborough's Giovanna Baccelli*, pp. 8–9.
[65] Gerald D. M. Howat, 'John Frederick Sackville, 3rd Duke of Dorset', *ODNB*, XLVII, pp. 536–37.

horror at the violence he experienced in France at the beginning of the revolution turned him back towards family responsibilities and the need to produce an heir. The parting with Baccelli seems to have been amicable. He settled on her an annual pension of £400 a year, and she left their son, the young John Frederick (*c*. 1779-1796) to be brought up and educated by him.[66] Sackville then married the heiress Arabella Cope who bore him a son and two daughters.

While living with Sackville at his home at Knole, Baccelli had the use of a personal suite of rooms. An interesting insight into Baccelli's life there come from a record by Fanny Burney on a visit to Knole to see the paintings, in October 1779:

> The Duke of Dorset was not there himself; but we were prevented from seeing the library, and two or three other modernised rooms, because Madlle. Bacelli was not to be disturbed.[67]

Burney's pique at not being able to see the refurbished rooms hints at Baccelli's status in the household. At the time of Burney's visit Baccelli was probably pregnant and her personal suite of rooms gave her unaccustomed and welcome privacy. Accounts from the time list stockings, shifts and petticoats for her and, later, payments to a wet nurse for her son, cat food, and toys for Master Sackville.[68]

Baccelli may have enjoyed such privacy in person, but the Locatelli sculpture was placed at the bottom of the grand staircase meaning that every visitor, official or personal, would have passed it. Thus the duke displayed his mistress as 'a sexual trophy which his male visitors could admire, and even touch'.[69] Those ascending or descending the stairs would have had an intimate view of his mistress's naked back and buttocks. Baccelli may have been an accomplished professional dancer, but this gave her a dubious status as a woman. Therefore, as a mistress, she could be given a role in the public display of the duke's prowess as a man.

In 1783, an itinerant artist painted portraits of the servants at Knole, including five who were associated with Baccelli. Two of these, her companion Mary Edwards and her

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[66] Sackville-West, *Inheritance,* p. 132.
[67] Charlotte Barrett, *Diary and Letters of Madame d'Arblay: Edited by her Niece*, 4 vols (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1854), I, p. 217.
[68] Sackville-West, *Inheritance*, p. 133.
[69] Gill Perry, 'Dirty dancing at Knole: portraits of Giovanna Baccelli and the performance of 'public intimacy'', in *Placing faces: The portrait and the English country house in the long eighteenth century,* ed. by Gill Perry, Kate Retford and Jordan Vibert with Hannah Lyons (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 117-142 (p. 129)

personal servant Andrea Coronin, were still with her at her death nearly twenty years later, suggesting an employer of some financial means and capable of instilling deep loyalty and friendship.[70] Press interest continued for the whole of Baccelli's time with the duke, and their response to her return from a visit to Paris to dance at the Opéra in 1783 is a good example of the tone adopted:

> Baccelli's return occasioned her amorous partner to take several steps to convince of her of his extreme attention [sic]; with this view he met her immediately after she landed in England and conducted her to his seat![71]

This interest from the English press in her and her relationship with the duke continued in 1783 when, as the newly appointed English ambassador to France, he took Baccelli with him and set her up in her own apartment in Paris. There, according to one London newspaper, she became part of the social scene:

> Madame Baccelli lives in great splendour in Paris, and no lady more truly deserves good fortune than herself. Her house is the resort of all the fashionable English in that gay metropolis; and it is the chief pleasure and study of her life, to show her gratitude to our nation for the protection with which she was honoured by our nobility.[72]

A little over two years later she was reported as the owner of one of the most brilliant carriages seen in the annual parade of mistresses to Longchamps:

> Baccelli, elegantly simple, à l'Angloise, attracted the eyes of the company. Her carriage was a neat vis-à-vis, drawn by four beautiful greys, most superbly harnessed, and adorned with fashionable devices, ribboned out à la Notable.[73]

The next month, the same coach is reported alongside the duke's at the King of France's annual review, that year graced by the presence of the queen, Marie Antoinette:

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[70] Karen Eliot, '"A Little Business for the Eye": Insights into the London Career of an Eighteenth-Century Ballerina', *Dance Chronicle*, 30 (2007), p. 1–27 (p. 25).
[71] *Morning Herald*, 3 January 1783.
[72] *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*, 9 February 1785.
[73] *General Evening Post*, 17 April 1787. This regular parade was an occasion where French aristocrats displayed their mistresses, expensively dressed, riding in smart coaches, pulled by fine horses: Kimberley Christman Campbell, *Fashion victims: dress at the court of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), pp. 116-155.

> In the duke of Dorset's carriage were Col. Gardiner, his Lady etc. Baccelli appeared in the elegant vis-à-vis she had built on purpose for Long Champs, and added Splendour to the pompous Cavalcade.[74]

This was not a mistress hidden away from society like a guilty secret, but someone who participated fully in the duke's life in Paris and at the French court. The fact that their affair lasted as long as it did, suggests a deep affection and friendship between Baccelli and the Duke of Dorset, as well as a degree of tolerance on the part of Baccelli when the he strayed from her. She seems to have successfully developed the bearing and *mien* necessary to socialise alongside the duke. Meeting and enjoying the company of aristocrats, both in London and Paris, through her association with the duke, she formed several long-term friendships, including one with Lord and Lady Cowper.[75]

On a visit to London in 1784 Baccelli appeared in the audience at the King's Theatre. She ensured that she would be noticed by wearing the latest fashion from Paris inspired by the Mongolfier brother's balloon flight:

> Baccelli displayed from one of the upper boxes at the Opera on Saturday evening, an enormous balloon hat; this was imported from Paris on her late return from that city. Baccelli has declared she did not leave a smaller hat behind; and yet this is so monstrous, that it is not an unreasonable conjecture to say, that she took her passage in it through the air![76]

As mistress of a duke she would have been dressed in clothes of the highest quality and at Longchamps she was on display, a visible marker of his staus. Her appearance in the balloon hat suggests a level of enjoyment on her part in the sensual pleasure of her clothes and that the performative nature of her career infused her whole life.

After parting from the Duke of Dorset in 1789, Baccelli developed an affection for their long-term friend Henry Herbert, 10th Earl of Pembroke (1734-1794). She lived with the Earl until he died, causing great consternation to his son, who felt the relationship reflected badly on the family.[77]

Her own son by the duke, John Frederick Sackville, served in the army and died of yellow fever in the West Indies in 1796.

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[74] *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 17 May 1787.
[75] Lehmann, 'Representing Baccelli', p. 85.
[76] *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser,* 10 May 1784
[77] Henry Herbert, Earl of Pembroke (ed.), *The Pembroke Papers: Letters and Diaries of Henry, Tenth Earl of Pembroke and his Circle,* 2 vols (London: Jonathan Cape 1950), II, p. 353.

The final move for Baccelli was to a house (by co-incidence in Sackville Street) where she lived with a 'James Carey, gentleman' until her death in 1801:

> Madame Baccelli, who for so many years distinguished herself as one of the most fascinating dancers that ever appeared on the Opera stage, died at her lodgings in Sackville Street on Thursday morning, after a most lingering and painful illness, which she bore with the most exemplary resignation, and with that sweetness of temper which rendered her so attracting in the days of youth and beauty.[78]

The details of her will reveal that her capacity for friendship extended not only to James Carey but also to other relatives, friends and servants, several of whom were given bequests. Mrs Mary Edwards, one of those servants painted at Knole nearly twenty years earlier and by 1801 living with Baccelli as her companion in Sackville Street, was left all of Baccelli's clothes, an annuity of £25 pounds a year, and 'my Metal Watch & Chain, & my Birds Cage, to take care of the Birds that are in it, and then sell it'.[79]

Baccelli as Bacchante

The third depiction of Baccelli was painted by the Duke of Dorset's friend, and president of the Royal Academy, Joshua Reynolds. In keeping with many of Reynolds's portraits she is shown in character as a performer but, unlike in Gainsborough's portrait, here is an image of Baccelli that played to the expectations of the male viewer who wilfully 'confused and conflated' the two professions of actress and courtesan in order to maintain a 'fantasy of control and accessibility'.[80] The original picture as commissioned by the duke was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1783, but has since been been lost.[81] It survives only in prints, the closest to the date of the painting being that produced by John Raphael Smith in 1783 [**Fig. 5.3**]. Baccelli looks out at the viewer, having turned away from the theatre mask that she holds up to her face. Her hair, decorated with vines, is tousled and a ringlet falls down her back, the dramatic lighting highlighting one side of her face and her naked shoulder. The

[78] *Morning Chronicle,* 9 May 1801.
[79] See Baccelli's will, dated 16 January 1801, registered in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury on 23 May that year: London-Kew, The National Archives PROB 11/1358.
[80] For a discussion of Reynold's attitudes to female performers see: Martin Postle, "'Painted Women": Reynolds and the Cult of the Courtesan', in *Notorious Muse*, ed. Asleson (2003), pp. 22–56 (p. 23).
[81] Einberg, *Gainsborough's Giovanna Baccelli*, lists the painting as exhibited: R.A. 1783, Guelph exhibition, New Gallery, 1891; listed: A. Graves and V. Cronin, *Reynolds,* 1899, vol. I, p. 41; C. J. Phillips 1929, Vol. II, repr. F.p. 200; and E. K. Waterhouse, *Reynolds,* 1941, p. 74; Engraving: John Raphael Smith (oval) 1783; G. Sanders 1867.

mask was an overt sign of the two-faced nature of the theatre, and it here gives the viewer a brief glimpse of the real person behind it. The vines indicated that she was a follower of Bacchus, God of wine and fertility, and a character often depicted in the theatre. It is as though she has paused on her way to the stage, looking out of the picture. This is Baccelli as an actress, a member of a group seen as dubious because of their protean abilities to change character and imitate others as part of their craft. If confronted offstage, how could anyone tell whether this was their real self or if they were acting, a question also hinted at in the reaction to Gainsborough's portrait of Baccelli.

Reynolds's depiction of Baccelli gives us an erotic image of this female performer as a Bacchante, demonstrating the dichotomy in attitudes towards the bodies of female performers. For Reynolds, all his subjects were in some way performers. His desire to raise portraiture to the level of history painting as a legitimate art allowed him to use the semblance of classical myth to depict respectable women in erotic guises, as muses and nymphs. In his portrait of Baccelli, he presents her as an enticing and beautiful woman, beckoning the viewer into the exotic world of the performer. Gainsborough, on the other hand, saw that, in the same way as outside the theatre, women were judged by what they looked like and, by associating themselves with women of quality through their clothing and appearance, might emphasise their own respectability.[82] Baccelli's costume in the Gainsborough portrait is to some extent a version of fashionable dress.

Baccelli as a Professional Woman

Of the three works of art commissioned by the Duke of Dorset and displayed at Knole, it was only Gainsborough who presented Baccelli as she would have looked on the stage, and it is possible that it was Baccelli herself who chose Gainsborough (over the duke's friend Reynolds) to paint her in a full-length portrait.[83] For Gainsborough, a successful portrait demanded empathy between himself and the sitter.[84] He depicts Baccelli in costume, but he has taken her out of the theatre, and into his world: a professional dancer but also part of

[82] Kimberley Crouch, 'The Public Life of Actresses: Prostitutes or Ladies?, in *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. By Hannah Barker, and Elaine Chalus (Harlow: Longman, 1977), pp. 58–78. For the more forgiving acceptance of female dancers on the public stage since the early-eighteenth century, see Mary Collins and Joanna Jarvis, 'The Great Leap from Earth to Heaven: The Evolution of Ballet and Costume in England and France in the Eighteenth Century', in *Costume*, *The Journal of the costume society of Great Britain,* 50 (2016), pp. 169–93.
[83] Einberg, *Gainsborough's Giovanna Baccelli*, p. 11.
[84] Rosenthal, *The Art of Thomas Gainsborough,* p. 160.

society. She crosses boundaries, an aspect which, as we have seen, proved profoundly disconcerting to some on first sight of this picture.

Gainsborough was a keen amateur musician, who enjoyed the theatre and the company of actors, and Baccelli may have met him in this way.[85] He had an understanding of the theatre and its practices, and at the behest of his friend Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816), had decorated the sides of the proscenium arch at the King's Theatre with pictures of dancers, considered 'remarkably picturesque and beautiful'.[86] His time spent in the theatre completing these paintings brought him into contact with the inner workings of rehearsals and dance classes, and would have offered Baccelli an artist who understood the business of the theatre. Even if he did not meet Baccelli herself on these occasions, he would have understood her as a person of talent and dedication—and this understanding may have influenced her choice of him. The previous discussion of Gainsborough's portrait of Mrs Robinson hints at the conversations around dress and pose that must have taken place at the commencement of such a painting. Gainsborough and Baccelli also must have come to some level of mutual agreement on how she would be presented.

A much smaller version of the portrait, currently at the Alfred Beit Foundation in Ireland, suggest some experimentation by Gainsborough in the creation of his portrait of Baccelli.[87] As has been mentioned, a portrait of a figure in movement was unusual for Gainsborough and this may have been a oil sketch to capture her pose, costume and a sense of light and shadow. Belsey suggests that some details are a little clumsy such as the proportion of her left hand, and the strong shadow cast by her figure that is 'too redolent of stage light'.[88] She is also wearing more stage make-up than in the final version and there is no tambourine. The details might indicate that the sketch was completed in, or immediately after, seeing her at the theatre. Once in the studio the make-up and shadows were toned down, giving a more naturalistic feel to the setting. Later, this much smaller portrait may also have provided the sitter with a portable version to take with her on tour.

There is also a drawing purporting to show the creation of the portrait, depicting Baccelli posing in a room at Knole attended by musicians and a servant, with the painter and his canvas in the foreground. Elizabeth Einberg attributes this work to Joseph Nash, suggesting that it might have been an abandoned idea for one of his 'genre' pictures of the

[85] Hugh Belsey, 'Gainsborough, Thomas', *ODNB*, XXI, pp. 266–74 (p. 273).
[86] *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 25 November 1778.
[87] Belsey, *Thomas Gainsborough: The Portraits, Fancy Pictures and Copies after Old Masters,* I, p.46.
[88] Ibid.

type Nash exhibited in the 1830s as series of 'olden times' images at the Royal Academy.[89] The fact that this sletch was produced may indicate the creative process behind the production of Gainsborough's portrait was imbued with some importance.

The costume depicted by Gainsborough gives a glimpse of how Baccelli might have looked when performing. It is tantalising to imagine how the performances in which Baccelli appeared, especially the *ballet d'action*, would have looked on stage. Images of performances at this time are rare; however *Médée et Jason*, staged at the King's Theatre, provides us with two very different depictions of the same ballet. A small print of the type often used in an almanac was published by Robert Baldwin in around 1782 [**Fig. 5.6**]; this shows the denouement of the ballet, with Médée flying out in her chariot leaving a distraught Jason beside the body of the dead Creuse.[90] It gives a real sense of how the scenery and mechanics looked on stage, with the pillars on one side having collapsed in the mayhem; maybe to allow passage for a chariot, in a cloud of smoke and carrying Madame Simonet as Médée, that flies above the heads of those left on the stage. The audience in the pit can be seen in front of the musicians at the foot of the stage—some gesticulating at the drama, others unmoved, more interested in those beside them—giving a sense of the proximity of the audience.

Francesco Bartolozzi engraved a satirical version of a dramatic moment in the same ballet, with the three main characters depicted in postures of high drama [**Fig. 5.7**]. The print shows Gaetan Vestris as Jason, recoiling in horror, Madame Simonet as Médée brandishing a dagger, and Baccelli as the nymph Creuse, cowering behind Jason. Behind them, the simple scenery flats depict a garden, and before them in the pit, three musicians play, seemingly impervious to the drama unfolding behind them. Whereas the first print probably gives a fairly accurate depiction of how the stage looked as a whole for this ballet, Bartolozzi emphasises the figures and style of dancing: he is not interested in the scenic elements, but in the style of movement. The fact that this popular performance brought about a burlesque suggests the dramatic effect that the new style of ballet had on its audience. Bartolozzi may have exaggerated the spectacle of the moment in his choice of poses in an attempt to satirise the high emotional drama being portrayed. However, what the dancers demonstrate are gestures of emotion formulated by John Weaver (1673-1760) much earlier in the century, and

[89] See Einberg, *Gainsborough's Giovanna Baccelli*, p. 33. The picture is joseph nash (attributed), *Sketch of Giovanna Baccelli Posing in the Ballroom at Knole*, nineteenth century, pencil and pen on prepared paper, laid on canvas. 90x115.5 cm, Knole House. It is reproduced in *BDA*, I (1973), p. 192.
[90] See Oxford, Bodleian Library, John Johnson Collection Musicians and Opera Singers (25) for a version of the print.

regularly employed in the intervening years.[91] Audiences had become accustomed to ballets or dances based on classical myths since the establishment of opera and dance at the court of Louis XIV in France. In these dance performances the denouement brought resolution to the drama through the intervention of the gods – often in the person of the king – to calm the passions and restore order to the world. In *Médée et Jason* the only resolution was brought about by the jealous and murderous rage of Médée, taking the production closer to a Jacobean tragedy than the elegant and formalised *ballet de cour*.

For most of Baccelli's audience their primary contact with images of the dancer would have been through prints. The Gainsborough portrait, with the addition of Baccelli's name on the tambourine, was reproduced as a print by John Jones in 1784, and would have been readily available in the print shops.[92] These shops also created a form of public gallery by displaying their wares in the window. A print by Angelo Albanesi after James Roberts, published in 1782, shows Baccelli as if at the side of the stage wearing her costume for Creuse in *Médée et Jason*, which exactly matches that in the Bartolozzi print. As in the costume for *Les Amans surpris*, the style is similar to fashionable dress, and yet she was dancing the role of a classical nymph. It would seem that for dancers as much as actresses, when performing on the stage the expected style was that of a respectable woman.

Another image of Baccelli by Roberts, which appears in John Bell's edition of theatrical texts, shows her as dancing in *Les Amans surpris*, wearing a costume that matches closely the one painted by Gainsborough.[93] Also found in Bell are Madame Simonet and Gaetan Vestris in their roles from *Ninette à la Cour*, which they danced together with Baccelli (see illustrations **4.7** and **4.8**).

Conclusion

A portrait is a performance. Choices must be made, not only about the artist, but also the setting, the pose, and the costume to be worn. Baccelli was depicted by Gainsborough, an artist famed for his portraits not only of the aristocracy in an appropriate setting, but also of performers and the demi-monde similarly rendered in his own style. Gainsborough seems to have accepted his sitters on their own terms.[94] Together Gainsborough and Baccelli

[91] John Weaver, *The Loves of Mars and Venus* (London: W. Mears and J. Browne, 1717), p. 21-28, published in facsimile in: Richard Ralph, *The Life and Works of John Weaver* (London: Dance Books, 1985), pp. 737–62.
[92] John Jones, after Thomas Gainsborough, *Signora Baccelli* (London: Abraham Wivell, 1784); London, British Museum: R, 10.4.
[93] J. Roberts, 'Giovanna Baccelli. Dancing in *Les Amans surpris',* in John Bell, *Bell's English Theatre: Consisting of the Most Esteemed English Plays* (London: John Bell, 1792), Plate XIV.
[94] Rosenthal, *The Art of Thomas Gainsborough,* p. 176.

produced a painting that shows Baccelli as a performer in her stage costume and wearing makeup, but in a Gainsborough setting of a grove of trees. A portrait may have been a useful strategy for taking control of one's public image, but such choices could still prove risky. There was the possibility that the hanging of the picture, on the crowded walls of the Academy, could place the sitter in an unfortunate conjunction with other public figures. The public reaction to a portrait might also prove problematic, and for Baccelli, the general praise for her dancing, because of the gossipy interest in her private activities turned to ambivalence when faced with her image on the wall of the gallery in the company of the élite. Her aristocratic lover the duke was not prepared to show his image in the same exhibition.

Whatever the reaction to the painting when on the wall of the Academy, its arrival at Knole alongside others was an event seen fit to be announced in the *General Evening Post*:

> Extract of a letter from Seven Oaks, July 25.
>
> The inhabitants of this place have the glad expectation of the arrival of the Duke of Dorset, at Knowl [*sic*], on Thursday next. His Grace has lately made many considerable additions to his collection of paintings at Knowl.
>
> A picture of Baccelli, *en dance,* by Gainsborough, exhibits a most striking and well-conceived attitude.[95]

There it remained, on show or in an attic, until 1890 when it was sold to Samuel Cunliffe Lister (later 1st Baron Masham), and then to the Tate Gallery in 1975.

However, if a portrait was seen as a way of taking control of one's public image, and changing perceptions of who one was, then Baccelli seems to have taken charge of her destiny through the commissioning of the Gainsborough portrait. The Reynolds portrait – which shows her as an actress – and the Locatelli sculpture – which depicts her as a lover – show the outward-facing Baccelli as seen by others. Gainsborough shows us Baccelli as an accomplished professional dancer, and by wearing her costume and makeup, the audience views her as her professional self. Moreover, he has used a tambourine as signifier for a dancer, instead of the ubiquitous mask of an actress.

When the Duke of Dorset finally married, neither the Locatelli sculpture nor the Gainsborough portrait could remain on display, the one being too explicit, the other too real, and both being visual echoes of the duke's former life.[96] The Reynolds painting, with its

[95] *General Evening Post,* 28 July 1785.
[96] Sackville-West, *Inheritance*, p. 139.

greater emphasis on the theatrical persona that hid the person beneath the character, remained on display in the house as a 'Bacchante'. This picture, however, is now lost, and is known only through prints, while the Locatelli, restored to a position on display in the house, is seen by the thousands of National Trust members who visit Knole House each year. Gainsborough's portrait, however, today hangs in the Tate Britain, one of the most visited galleries in London, where, alongside other luminaries of the eighteenth-century, Baccelli is viewed by more than a million visitors each year. If Giovanna Baccelli's wish was to be remembered by posterity as a talented and accomplished professional woman, then surely, she has succeeded in that aim.