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# The Clown Suicides

The Death and Cinematic Afterlife of Marceline Orbes and Francis “Slivers” Oakley, New York’s Superstar Clowns, in Charlie Chaplin’s *Limelight*

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**ABSTRACT:** Although generally seen as an autobiographical piece, a film that reflects on the declining popularity of its director and star, Charlie Chaplin’s *Limelight* (1952) is a sharp, albeit obscured commentary on the lives of two of the twentieth century’s most important forgotten comedians. The names of Marceline Orbes and Francis “Slivers” Oakley mean almost nothing today, but these comedians were hugely influential, inspiring not only Chaplin but also Buster Keaton. Orbes and Oakley shared a focus on pathos and the mime that helped to provide Chaplin and Keaton with their comic framework. Though their careers were destroyed by the rise of cinematic comedy (and the performers whom they had helped to inspire), a development that led to their suicides, the influence of Orbes and Oakley was long lasting thanks to those successful big-screen comedians who understood and internalized their works.

**KEYWORDS:** silent film, vaudeville, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Marceline Orbes, Francis “Slivers” Oakley, film comedy, comedians

At the beginning of *Limelight* (1952), Charlie Chaplin’s film about forgotten clowns, the character of Thereza, a failed ballerina suffering from some type of psychological hysteria, attempts to take her own life. She is, of course, saved by Chaplin’s character, Calvero, who rails at her about the indignity of her chosen course. Looking contently out of Thereza’s window, he assures her that “life can be wonderful if you’re not afraid of it. All it needs is courage.” Thereza naturally resists Calvero’s reassurances, inspiring Chaplin’s character to respond with ever more excited and earnest declarations about

the beauty of life and the ugliness of suicide. "What is there to fight for? Everything! Life itself, isn't that enough? To have lived, suffered, enjoyed. What is there to fight for? Life is a beautiful, magnificent thing, even to a jellyfish. . . . [T]he trouble is you won't fight, you've given in, continually dwelling upon sickness and death. But there's something just as inevitable as death and that's life. Life, life, life!"<sup>1</sup> This exchange between would-be victim and would-be savior sets the tone for the rest of the film; it is, fundamentally, a study of performers and the fine line they tread between adulation and desperation, between psychological validation and mental disintegration. In terms of Chaplin's output, which so often dealt with broader social issues, this theme can feel anomalous. However, far from mere narrative devices, the tragedy of the failed comedian and the suicidal performer were fundamental to Chaplin's life and his understanding of filmed comedy as a mode of artistic expression.

It can be easy to see *Limelight* as a piece of autobiography, a reflection of Chaplin's own declining popularity (the film certainly has such a dimension), but it is at least as biographical as it is autobiographical. Its narrative is haunted by the metaphorical ghosts of the clowns and comedians who inspired Chaplin but who fell into obscurity and, undermined by cinema's rise, took their own lives. By paying careful attention to details, Chaplin was able to capture something essential about the experiences of his early influences, memorializing them through *Limelight*, though not in such an obvious way that their memory—and place in the history of popular culture—can be easily recovered. Clowns like Marceline Orbes and Francis "Slivers" Oakley, who left no filmic record, have been almost completely forgotten, but *Limelight*, alongside Buster Keaton's *The Cameraman* (1928), serves as a type of memorial to their work and as a reflection on their contribution to the comic canon of the twentieth century.

March 5, 1916 — the day the clown died. In the first decade and a half of the twentieth century, Francis "Slivers" Oakley was one of the most famous clowns in theater, having achieved notoriety while touring with the Ringling Brothers' circus at the turn of the twentieth century and then as a featured artist and comic entertainer at New York's popular Hippodrome Theatre beginning in 1905. His one-man pantomime of a baseball game, in particular, was a sensation, a creative and commercial peak. By 1915, however, Slivers's career entered a sudden, terminal decline. By the time of his death in 1916, he struggled to find any form of meaningful, remunerative work.<sup>2</sup>

He had found a new home in the circus, but he was no longer a featured performer, let alone the subject of media or popular attention. By March, he was struggling with a failed personal relationship. Shortly after that last failure, Oakley barricaded himself into his room, stuffed the keyholes, covered his windows, and opened up the gas supply. He was found dead, “wearing only his pajamas.”<sup>3</sup>

Like many of his contemporaries, Oakley found the 1910s to be a difficult period. Though he had spent the previous decade building a successful stage career through which he had earned a not insignificant degree of fame, the growth of cinema had fatally undermined his livelihood. Audience members had been transfixed by his one-man baseball pantomime, but by 1915 companies such as Keystone had popularized a new way for those same audiences to absorb an ever-growing corps of comedians whose acts were as varied as the number of films in which they appeared.<sup>4</sup> Oakley’s one-man baseball game capped a long career spent developing comic routines with broad appeal, tailored for performance on the stage.<sup>5</sup> For a performer like Buster Keaton, however, such a scenario comprised only one small part of one his films—*The Cameraman*—nothing more.<sup>6</sup> Once scenarios or routines were committed to film, new scenarios, new jokes, and new pantomimes were required.

Cinematic comedy was destroying careers and lives, but it built on the very foundation that it was helping to dismantle. The nuanced slapstick and pantomime of the master stage clown found, in a modified, ever-evolving form, a new home on the silver screen, which paid homage to the absurdity of Slivers’s baseball game and the droll comedy of his former collaborator Marceline. Cinema destroyed Slivers and Marceline—and it made them immortal.

It is difficult to assess the long-term impact of any given clown on the evolution of comic silent film, but one measure might well be the level of name recognition of such a performer. As one contemporary reporter reflected following Slivers’s death, “The regiments of clowns who bawl and tumble out onto the Garden tanbark every few minutes at performances of ‘the greatest show’ are invariably unknown even by name to circus audiences, except when, perhaps once in a generation, a George Fox, a Tony Denier, a Dan Luby or, master of them all, Slivers Oakley comes forth with a genius for pantomime that lifts them from the ruck of individuality.”<sup>7</sup> That recognition led to imitation and, ultimately, innovation.

Despite being unable to forge meaningful careers in entertainment after 1915, Slivers, along with his one-time stage partner Marceline, influenced key artistic figures in the cinematic movement that would ultimately make them irrelevant.<sup>8</sup> Slivers perfected the art of ridiculing the lived experiences of his audience—particularly participation in popular sporting pastimes, from boxing to baseball, a gag that was recognized and internalized by young Buster Keaton. Likewise, it was Marceline who showed Charlie Chaplin that clowns could achieve poignancy through the medium of mime.<sup>9</sup> As Buster Keaton would recall decades after the clowns' suicides, "My favourite clown was Marceline at the Hippodrome, and Slivers Oakley of the Barnum and Bailey show."<sup>10</sup> Slivers and Marceline endured similarly tragic career trajectories, but their lasting influence demonstrated that, even in the face of failure, it was possible for the obsolete to be the unintentional architect of brilliance and success.

November 5, 1927 — the day the *other* clown died. By the time of his suicide, a little over a decade after Oakley's, Marceline's star had long since faded. Like Slivers, with whom he had worked at the New York Hippodrome, Marceline had struggled to find relevance in the latter half of the 1910s; he continued to perform in the circus during that time, but even there he found little acclaim. Like Slivers before him, Marceline had found work as an ensemble clown, one low-paid painted face among many, not as a featured performer. Following his retirement from show business, Marceline twice entered the restaurant business but failed on both occasions. Out of desperation, he made one last attempt to revive his stage career but found that "there were no engagements for him when he went the rounds of the booking offices" in 1927. Shortly after making the attempt, he killed himself.<sup>11</sup> Though the failure of his restaurants was the immediate precursor to his undoing, Marceline's inability to revive either his career or his star loomed large over his death.<sup>12</sup> His body was discovered kneeling as if in prayer, a self-inflicted bullet wound to the head, and surrounded by old pictures of the clown in his prime. His old costume, a Tramp-esque, ill-fitting tuxedo, was in sight, removed from its normal resting place so that Marceline could observe it one final time. This predeath ritual may have reminded Marceline of who he had been, but it made little impression on the police officer who attended the body. As David Robinson has argued, Marceline was, by that point, a deeply obscure figure, unknown to most of his contemporaries, and after his death, he was ignored by most historians.<sup>13</sup> Writing about the suicide shortly

after it occurred, *Time* magazine noted that “twenty years ago the policeman would not have had to ask how to spell ‘Marceline.’ He would have been accustomed to it in big shiny letters over the entrance to the Hippodrome.”<sup>14</sup> Although Marceline meant little to those who found him, his influence had likely touched the otherwise unknowing police officer in other ways.

A straight line can be drawn from Marceline to Chaplin. The pair first encountered one another during Marceline’s five-year run, from 1900 to 1905, at the London Hippodrome, the venue that made him a star. Marceline was building an international reputation at that point, while the young Chaplin was in the early stages of his own career, playing a cat opposite the bumbling clown in a production of *Cinderella*. Marceline clearly made an impression on the young actor, who recalled the clown’s act in vivid detail more than sixty years later:

Marceline, the great French [Spanish] clown, dressed in a sloppy evening dress and opera hat, would enter with a fishing rod, sit on a camp stool, open a large jewel-case, bait his hook with a diamond necklace, then cast it into the water. After a while he would “chum” with smaller jewellery [*sic*], throwing in a few bracelets, eventually emptying the whole jewel-case. Suddenly he would get a bite and throw himself into paroxysms of comic gyrations struggling with the rod, and eventually pulling out of the water a small trained poodle dog, who copied everything Marceline did: if he sat down, the dog sat down; if he stood on his head, the dog did likewise.<sup>15</sup>

Though Chaplin’s interactions with Marceline appear to have been limited, his autobiography reflects a keen interest in the clown’s construction of comic routines. He was, according to Chaplin, “droll and charming,” and when the Ringling Brothers circus came to Los Angeles in 1918, the memory of Marceline was enough to encourage Chaplin to attend. By that point, however, Marceline’s star power had been exhausted, and Chaplin was horrified to discover that the once-famous clown was now “just one of many clowns that ran around the enormous ring.” To underline how great an artistic loss that constituted, Chaplin lamented that Marceline, as he seemed to him then, was “a great artist, lost in the vulgar extravagance of the three ring circus.”<sup>16</sup>

Chaplin does much in his autobiography to preserve Marceline’s memory and reputation, but it is Chaplin’s description of the clown’s costume—“sloppy evening dress and opera hat”—that is of particular relevance here, as it might

well be applied, with only slight modification, to Chaplin's own famous costume. To be sure, the Tramp's iconic outfit was inspired by several different sources, including the contents of the Keystone Studios' wardrobe, but important thematic parallels between Chaplin's and Marceline's costumes suggest they both sought to mock genteel sensibilities (see figures 1 and 2). Marceline typically wore a smart suit of clothing, but it is below the waist that Chaplin's choice of adjective—"sloppy"—starts to make sense. While Marceline's torso was admirably bedecked, his trousers were oversized and so ill fitting that they had to be rolled up at the hems. The costume lightly



Figure 1 This rare image from 1925 records Marceline's failing professional life two years prior to his suicide. His costume remains unchanged from the earlier, successful stage of his career; the image itself points to Marceline's attempts to regain media attention and leverage nostalgia for his once-popular act, though no evidence suggests that this press photograph was reprinted by contemporary media. Scrawled on the back of this image are the words of a prior owner: "killed self." Kadel and Herbert News Feature Photos N.Y., July 14, 1925, unpublished.



Figure 2 Charlie Chaplin from *The Rink* (1916). Studio publicity still.

mocked refined fashion: correct in many details but wrong or exaggerated in others. Chaplin's own costume accomplished something similar, likewise through the contrast between the style of clothing on display and its inept tailoring. Like Marceline, Chaplin decked himself in the raiment of the affluent while hinting at his character's absurdity through the uneven tailoring on show, particularly his oversized trousers. In both cases, gentility framed a masterful farce. Of course, Marceline was hardly the only clown to employ this visual trick with his costume. Toto, another clown who found success at the New York Hippodrome (he began his career at that venue in 1915, just as Marceline's came to an end), sported similar attire, but it was Marceline alone with whom Chaplin worked, whom Chaplin admired, whom Chaplin patronized, and whom Chaplin recalled in affectionate and unusual detail decades after he had slipped from the public eye.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond the clothing aesthetic were structural similarities between Chaplin and Marceline. Despite working in a medium that allowed for sound, Marceline acted without a voice, communicating with his audience only through the medium of mime. Silent clown performances were not



necessarily unusual, but the combination of silence and costume, buffoonery and agility, established a framework that can be observed throughout much of Chaplin's own work. For his part, Marceline rejected the clown label, preferring instead to call himself a *comedian* in order to distinguish himself from those other performers who wore the characteristic makeup pioneered by Joseph Grimaldi at the turn of the 1800s.<sup>18</sup> Marceline avoided the seemingly mindless buffoonery of so many of his peers by combining the farcical with a somewhat more refined, more subtle sensibility that shone when he was in the spotlight but was lost during his later years working as an ensemble circus entertainer.<sup>19</sup> The example that Chaplin gives of Marceline's fishing with a diamond necklace reflects the clown's ability to command during solo performances; it was a gag anchored in the mundane, in moments of contemplative silence that could then be punctured by the clown's increasingly frantic attempts to catch his prey. The follow-up routine, in which Marceline was mimicked by the small dog that he had fished out of the scenery, would likely have accentuated the buffoonery of the piece, but even then, perhaps owing to the exigency of working with an animal, it is not hard to imagine moments of silence between the clown and his catch. The implied affection on show likely deepened the poignancy of the overall piece. As one reporter tellingly put it, "Marceline was a master of lovable pathos."<sup>20</sup>

At the height of his fame, Slivers also appears to have employed this nuanced approach to comic routines, drawing out ordinary moments and then puncturing them with physical, self-realizing farce. A reviewer in 1904 praised the baseball sketch, for example, noting that Slivers "secure[d] a quantity of first rate pantomimic comedy from the placing of the bases," but added that "it is probably stretched out a bit too long," likely because of the time spent walking between bases, a part of the routine that would have to have been repeated at least three times. According to that same reviewer, "The act should be cut at least five minutes."<sup>21</sup> Writing in 1923, *New York Times* reporter John Corbin reflected that "Slivers used to maintain that clowning is a creative art, the slapstick being destructive of all originality, and never ceased to mourn that competition with three rings made his more imaginative efforts impossible."<sup>22</sup> Apparently neither Marceline nor Slivers intended his acts to be wall-to-wall laughs or spectacle, and they were not.

Both Marceline and Slivers used silence and careful pacing in their acts, but of the two it was Marceline who demonstrated the power of such routines for Chaplin. If Chaplin can be called a clown, then he was one who

built on Marceline's example. Marceline may not have been the first or only clown to combine the elements that defined his performances, but he was likely one of the best, and it was through Marceline, whom he admired in particular, that Chaplin was exposed to such an approach to building comic routines. Without a detailed film record, it is impossible to assess the pair's performances in a side-by-side manner, but such may not be necessary in this case. There was something about Marceline beyond the costume that Chaplin admired, something that piqued his comic interests and held them for a lifetime. It also seems that whatever the mechanical differences in their physical comedy, Chaplin and Marceline were perceived in a similar fashion, suggesting that they hit similar comic notes even if the precise execution of their routines differed. A description of Marceline by the *Brooklyn Eagle* makes the point: "Without speaking a single word, he was a master of pantomime, and as an example of the useless, well meaning individual who gets in the way of everybody, Marceline was a veritable scream. Who of those who watched him in his vain endeavours to assist the stage hands in rolling up the rugs of the Hippodrome stage will ever forget the short, agile, comic little man?"<sup>23</sup> Whether or not Chaplin ever directly referenced Marceline in his specific physical performance, the clown's work seemed to mirror and predict Chaplin's own, while his treatment of Marceline in *My Autobiography* (1964) suggests that the older clown provided Chaplin with not only inspiration but also a standard against which the film star could measure himself.

In his physical presentation, Chaplin referenced the "droll" performance of Marceline throughout much of his career but made his most direct reference to the clown in *Limelight*.<sup>24</sup> In this film, Chaplin plays a former stage clown, Calvero, whose once-bright career has faded almost to nothingness. Like Marceline, Calvero hails from the tradition of British music halls, decked in attire that combines the face paint of Grimaldi with a costume grounded in the real world.<sup>25</sup> At the film's climax, during which Chaplin at last shares the screen with Buster Keaton, Calvero's costume closely mirrors Marceline's—evenings wear marked by buffoonish flourishes (see figures 3 and 4).<sup>26</sup> Chaplin seems to make several other direct references to his progenitor. Though he is clearly portraying a clown, the posters that adorn Calvero's small room refer to him as a "comedian" (specifically a "tramp comedian"), which is the same label that Marceline used to refer to himself. Also noteworthy is that Chaplin sets his largely autobiographical story in



Figure 3 Marceline in 1910. *Pittsburgh Gazette Times*, November 21, 1910, 9.



Figure 4 Charlie Chaplin (right) and Buster Keaton (left) in *Limelight* (1952), giving Marceline and Slivers one more moment in the spotlight. Screenshot.

the world of the show business generation that had preceded his own rise to prominence, choosing a debonair clown as his tragic protagonist rather than, for instance, a failed silent film star. Considering that the tragic Frank Tinney is cited as one of the film's inspirations (specifically, by providing the prototype for Calvero's decidedly un-Marceline like spoken-word jokes and songs), it is surprising that *Limelight* does not tell a story that mirrors Tinney's own scandal-laden demise.<sup>27</sup> Tinney may have been on Chaplin's mind when he made *Limelight*, but Tinney's experiences make up a fraction of what appears on the screen. *Limelight* is steeped in the British music halls of Chaplin's youth, the early training ground for his career and, as a result, the film draws for inspiration on a broad tradition of tragic entertainers, including Chaplin's own father. But it is specifically a clown—billed as a “comedian”—who anchors the story. Indeed, the film is set in 1914, the year of Chaplin's own cinematic debut and Marceline's final season as a successful regular at the New York Hippodrome, the intersection of two inverted career trajectories.<sup>28</sup> As one reporter would reflect shortly after Marceline's suicide, “He was Marceline, the artist, who had once been used—and he had taken no pleasure in it—as a measuring stick for young Charles Chaplin.”<sup>29</sup>

Like Tinney, Marceline meant something to Chaplin, though (as Barry Anthony has correctly noted) Chaplin seems to have had a general obsession

with those peers, a morbidly large number of whom committed suicide.<sup>30</sup> Marceline, the tragic clown battling irrelevance, provides the single most poignant image to appear in *Limelight*, yet there was the other clown, examined here, who was very rarely discussed in the context of Chaplin or *Limelight*, and whose life story appears to have influenced that film's final narrative form. Slivers Oakley might appear to be a minor figure of little long-term influence over the entertainment industry, but the opening of *Limelight* suggests otherwise. There Calvero discovers a young ballerina suffocating in her room, the cracks in her front door stuffed with towels so that none of the gas she had released could escape; that set of circumstances bears a noteworthy, though hardly conclusive, parallel to that of Slivers's death in 1916.<sup>31</sup> Chaplin had little, if anything, to say on the subject of Slivers, unlike with Marceline, but when the circumstances of Sliver's life and the plot of *Limelight* are considered in relation to one another, remarkable parallels strongly suggest that Chaplin not only was aware of the circumstances surrounding Slivers's death but that he also actively integrated elements of that narrative into his film. Marceline and Slivers had formed a successful partnership at the New York Hippodrome, and they remained as intertwined in death as they had been in life.<sup>32</sup>

The central relationship at the heart of *Limelight* features an aged Calvero and a much younger ballerina, Thereza, played by Claire Bloom. The pair are strikingly mismatched in terms of age, but a relationship nevertheless starts to blossom after Calvero saves Thereza from her attempted suicide by gas. Thereza and Calvero live together following that incident, and over time their relationship grows, although their age difference creates a barrier that is never entirely overcome. Like Calvero, Slivers rescued a much younger woman, an aspiring vaudeville performer, Viola Stoll, from a personal nadir of her own, plucking her from obscurity and near desolation and inviting her to live with him in spite of a twenty-six-year age gap—she was sixteen; he was forty-two. Now living together, as in the story of *Limelight*, the pair formed a relationship, though in a sharp divergence from the film it ended bitterly when Stoll left Slivers, taking his former wife's jewelry in the process. Stoll was arrested shortly after, convicted, and jailed for three years. Slivers attempted to reconcile six months prior to her release from prison, but Stoll was not interested in restarting their relationship.<sup>33</sup> When Slivers proposed marriage, his one-time partner rejected the offer, though, according to one report, "the clown wept so bitterly that she told him she would think it over

and let him know later."<sup>34</sup> The answer remained the same, however, and within twelve hours of that meeting, Slivers was dead.<sup>35</sup>

In *Limelight*, by contrast, Calvero and Thereza only temporarily separate, and it is the aged clown who absconds, convinced that he is not worthy of Thereza's love. Prior to their temporary separation, Thereza, in conversation with another character, articulates the terms of her love for the old clown: "I really love him. . . . It's something I've lived with, grown to. It's his soul, his sweetness, his sadness. Nothing will ever separate me from that." Stoll, on the other hand, had "wanted no more of 'Slivers'" following her arrest.<sup>36</sup> Though there are significant parallels between these stories, considered broadly, the outcomes fundamentally differ, as if Chaplin was retrospectively attempting to remedy the clown suicides of the past, to talk to those already dead about the folly of giving up as he reversed certain acts in order to ennoble the clown. In the words of Calvero's impassioned rant against suicide:

Billions of years it's taken to evolve human consciousness, and you want to wipe it out. Wipe out the miracle of existence, more important than anything in the whole universe. What can the stars do? Nothing, but sit on their axis; and the sun, shooting flames two hundred and eighty thousand miles high, so what? Wasting all its natural resources, can the sun think, is it conscious? No, but you are.<sup>37</sup>

Chaplin's film has a strong prolife, antisuicide theme whose effect is to reverse the real-life story of Slivers and Viola Stoll. In both the film and reality, the older clown is "[the woman's] only friend," but whereas love failed and suicide succeeded in reality, in Chaplin's fiction, the suicide attempt is thwarted and love prevails.<sup>38</sup>

This narrative reversal similarly seems to reference Marceline's story. When Chaplin encountered Marceline in 1918, the older performer was already despondent. Chaplin recalled that meeting in his autobiography, noting the type of surrendered failure that he depicted in *Limelight*: "I was in his dressing-room . . . and made myself known, reminding him that I had played a Cat at the London Hippodrome with him. But he reacted apathetically. Even under his clown make-up he looked sullen and seemed in a melancholy torpor."<sup>39</sup> In his film, Chaplin gives Calvero a significant other who is able to help the clown overcome his despondent state. Near the end of *Limelight*, a meeting between Thereza and Calvero in the latter's dressing room is the

reverse image of Chaplin's own ineffective visit to Marceline in 1918. There was no Thereza to help Marceline overcome his depression: as one newspaper declared, "His death revealed that he had few friends."<sup>40</sup> In *Limelight*, however, Calvero is both the giver and recipient of collegial support. Chaplin overcomes the tragedy of Marceline's life by depicting Calvero as part of a self-supporting system of stage performers who encouraged and were, in turn, encouraged by their peers. That was not necessarily a new idea or one that was unique to Chaplin. Writing shortly after Marceline's death, one reporter speculated that "there were many who would have helped him out had they known." He was "part of the carefree youth of many," and "the power of memory" would have "voluntarily loosened the purse strings of New York had the playgoers of twelve years ago have known of his plight."<sup>41</sup> Chaplin made that speculation a reality. Marceline never benefited from such a nostalgic outpouring of support, but Calvero rather pointedly does. In the finale of *Limelight*, a benefit gala is organized in his name. The house is packed (a stark contrast to the scene on the street, where Calvero (just like Marceline) had a recent stint performing to scant donations, and Calvero's performance, finally, brings down the house. The clown is redeemed—and then he dies.<sup>42</sup>

Chaplin's art seems to be imitating life even as it reverses key defeats, turning tragedy into triumph. The stories of both Marceline and Slivers appear to be reflected yet improved. Despite clear links between Marceline and Chaplin, no direct evidence shows that Chaplin drew upon Slivers's life for inspiration. However, Chaplin himself offers something of an explanation for why so much of Slivers's life story, which supplements Marceline's, appears to be featured in *Limelight*. In the film's opening scenes, Calvero is convinced by Thereza's doctor not to take the still-unconscious young woman to the hospital because her attempted suicide would trigger an investigation leading to her arrest. Calvero, in turn, convinces his landlady of the need for secrecy regarding Thereza's presence in his room after the landlady declares her intention to summon an ambulance: "If you do, it'll be in all the papers."<sup>43</sup> Indeed, media showed significant interest in the suicides of Marceline and Slivers; clown suicides provided compelling news copy. For the first time since their careers had collapsed, the pair was thrust back into the limelight, so to speak, in a significant way.<sup>44</sup> After Marceline's death, the press drew explicit links between him and Oakley.<sup>45</sup>

Slivers and Marceline created a tragic media narrative that laid bare the darker side of the era's entertainment industry: "Why do clowns kill

themselves?," asked one reporter, reflecting on the deaths.<sup>46</sup> The public personae of Marceline and Slivers were, for the most part, happy, buffoonish, funny, and entertaining, but their personal lives, rocked by their later career failings, belied that carefree façade.<sup>47</sup> The pair's deaths provided the media of the time with a compelling tragedy, revised in *Limelight*.<sup>48</sup> Chaplin may not have drawn consciously on stories of Slivers's suicide to frame his film, but *Limelight* nevertheless seems to noticeably reflect the media attention that surrounded his death. It is possible that Chaplin, working from memory, mistakenly fused details of Marceline's and Slivers's lives together; his autobiography is startling and uncharacteristically inaccurate when it comes to the date of Marceline's death, stating that it occurred not in 1927, but in 1919, just a few years after Slivers's suicide.<sup>49</sup> In *Limelight*, Chaplin explores the tragedy of the forgotten comedian, building on an idea that had been explored extensively by the media in the wake of the clown suicides. On the one hand, *Limelight* is a deeply autobiographical piece, a film that draws on personal experience and the challenges faced by Chaplin at that very difficult point in his career.<sup>50</sup> On the other, it is a deeply biographical film, concerned not with Chaplin's own life but an earlier wave of comic obsolescence. It is a story of the self—a story of the creator—but it is also a story of otherness rooted in the media mythology surrounding Marceline and Slivers. Calvero, the clown of *Limelight*, is both a metaphorical and literal realization of his creator, a character who straddles generations of performers, connecting and illustrating their shared experiences and common challenges.

The figurative fingerprints of Slivers, in spite of his not being namechecked by Chaplin, can be discerned in *Limelight*. However, whereas Chaplin learned from Marceline what it was to be an August—"the name given to those clowns who do not wear the familiar baggy pantaloons with ruffles and exaggerated polka dots, but who rely upon misfit clothes as a costume to extract laughter from an audience," as the *Brooklyn Eagle* put it<sup>51</sup>—Slivers's much more traditional stage persona appears to have had little, if any, further impact upon the auteur. Unlike Marceline, Slivers was known for his ridiculous and outlandish costumes, particularly his feet, which were "fully a foot long and covered with rings and colored stones."<sup>52</sup> Chaplin had little use for such ludicrous iconography, but Slivers's artistry had at least one further moment in the postmortem sun through another master of early comic cinema. In 1928, a year after Marceline's well publicized death and twelve years after Oakley's suicide, Buster Keaton—who made his only on-screen

appearance with Chaplin in *Limelight* as his comic partner—included a one-man game of baseball in *The Cameraman* (see figure 5).<sup>53</sup> Though no doubt adapted for a new medium and reflective of Keaton's own comic sensibilities, the film seems to evince much of the buffoonish heart that occupied the original routine. Because the scenario takes place on an actual baseball field, Keaton's character has no need to comically place the bases, as Slivers had done at the Hippodrome, but other aspects of the sequence reflect the fragmentary record left of the original piece. In the film, for example, Keaton's pitcher expertly puts out imaginary players running between bases, just as Slivers "cleverly [put] out everybody who had dared run to home."<sup>54</sup>

It may seem like a small point, but successfully reproducing Slivers's comic performance was apparently no easy task. During a walkout brought on by monetary disputes in 1906, another performer, Harry Ladell, had attempted to play Slivers's role at the Little Jack Horner Company where the clown was then employed, but in spite of the theoretically simple premise at the heart of Slivers's routine, Ladell could provide only a "poor imitation" of the real thing. Slivers, it appears, had a certain comic *je ne sai quoi* that allowed him to make his performances work.<sup>55</sup> That Keaton's baseball sequence turned



Figure 5 Buster Keaton prepares to pitch in his imaginary game of baseball in *The Cameraman* (1928). Screenshot.



out as well as it did speaks to Keaton's strengths as an adaptable physical comedian as well as to Slivers's own enduring artistic successes.<sup>56</sup> Unlike *Limelight*, which seems to draw on the media narrative forged by Slivers's and Marceline's deaths, *The Cameraman* incorporates a meaningful aspect of Slivers's body of work. Not only does *The Cameraman* pay homage to the stage clown; it also creates an enduring cinematic representation of Slivers's single most important contribution to popular, vaudeville-style comic routines. Moreover, it underlines how much of an impact Slivers had on his audience. Writing in 1907, one reporter for the *New York Sun* commented that on "Orphan Day" at the circus, "the boys were particularly tickled with the Slivers baseball pantomime, as most of them play the game themselves."<sup>57</sup> Under other circumstances, such a passage could potentially be read as meaningless hyperbole, empty rhetoric designed to aggrandize that which was otherwise disposable and forgettable. However, considering the distance that separated Keaton's adaptation from the original performances of Slivers's baseball game, we can reasonably conclude that the routine was a memorable, enduring one. Just as Chaplin indicates the power of Marceline's performances by imitating the broad style of his costume and writing in detail about him decades after his death, Keaton's decade-plus revival of Slivers's signature routine, alongside a namecheck of the clown as late as 1958 and 1960, reveals the effectiveness of his baseball masquerade, its ability to outlive its author while remaining relevant even in the face of its own outmoded heritage.<sup>58</sup>

Because we lack a meaningful record of their performances, both Marceline and Slivers are nearly unknowable artistically. The nuance and subtlety of their artistry, however manifested, cannot be examined or pored over; their contributions to the development of popular comic art forms in the twentieth century are, therefore, largely obscured from view. That their performances are now lost does not, however, mean that their influence was not profound. Rather, the loss means that assessments of their contributions must speculate how they helped to alter the comic DNA of the period that followed in their wake. Doing so is not an easy task; hundreds of vaudevillians and other entertainers from that era participated in the evolution of popular entertainment, but by considering the specific influence that New York's superstar clowns had on the luminaries of silent comedy—Chaplin and Keaton—some sense of Marceline and Slivers's broader significance can be established.<sup>59</sup>

Marceline and Slivers were not preeminent influences for Chaplin and Keaton, but these clowns were important, helping to shape aesthetic style and comic sensibilities that would be remembered, developed, and adapted by the later generation of performers. That Marceline and Slivers were unable or unwilling to develop careers of their own in film should not lead historians and other academics to minimize their importance.<sup>60</sup> Because they disappeared into the ether of the live stage, their influence must instead be identified by its proxy effects—including Chaplin's Tramp and Keaton's baseball-loving cameraman—and the way their life stories created a media narrative concerned with suicidal clowns, a narrative that reappeared in later projects such as *Limelight*. Marceline and Slivers set a particular standard for their time, but they also defined a set of sensibilities and ideas that some of those who followed appreciated and built on. By influencing key players, Marceline and Slivers were able to influence an essential part of the changing comic landscape on film, guiding through example, memory, and nostalgia a number of aspects of the evolving comic sensibilities of the nation long after their own acts had fallen into obsolescence and obscurity. Through Chaplin and Keaton, Marceline and Slivers did not disappear but found an enduring, albeit hidden, place in the pop culture canon. Neither Marceline nor Slivers produced the type of performance that could be revisited after their deaths, but their impact on at least a few important individuals was deep and long lasting, and through these later performers, Marceline Orbes and Slivers Oakley won a cinematic afterlife.

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#### NOTES

1. *Limelight*, directed by Charlie Chaplin (Los Angeles: United Artists, 1952), film, digital download from iTunes.

2. Frank Cullen, Florence Hackman, and Donald McNeilly, eds., *Vaudeville Old and New: An Encyclopaedia of Variety Performers in America* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 839.

3. "Slivers, Famous as Clown, Ends His Life for Love," *New York Sun*, March 9, 1916, 5.

4. John Kenrick, "History of Musical Film," pt. 2, <http://www.musicals101.com/1927-30film2.htm>. For the growth of Keystone Studios and the lead-up to the release of its first feature-length comedy, *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (directed by Mack Sennett), see David Robinson, *Chaplin: His Life and Art* (London: Penguin, 2001), 105–33.

5. For reactions to Oakley earlier in his career, see "Freaks Have an 'At Home,'" *New York Dramatic Mirror*, April 13, 1907, 18.

6. *The Cameraman*, directed by Buster Keaton and Edward Sedgewick (Los Angeles: MGM, 1928), TCM Print, 17:17-20:33.

7. "Slivers, Famous as Clown, Ends His Life for Love," 5.

8. Oakley's and Marceline's failure to adapt to the changing show business landscape is part of a much larger narrative in which the tradition of live stage performances in the United States, particularly vaudeville, collapsed in the face of cinema's growing popularity. See Trav S. D., *No Applause—Just Throw Money: The Book That Made Vaudeville Famous* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 3–5, 241–69.

9. Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (1964; London: Penguin, 2003), 45.

10. Herbert Feinstein, "Buster Keaton: An Interview, 1960," in *Buster Keaton Interviews*, ed. Kevin W. Sweeney (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 128–46; 132. Interestingly, in a slightly earlier interview, Keaton also cited Marceline as his favorite clown but omitted any mention of Slivers, suggesting that Marceline was his true favorite. See Robert Franklin and John Franklin, "Interview with Buster Keaton, 1958," in *Buster Keaton Interviews*, 62–102; 81.

11. "Broadway Pauses to Offer Final Tribute to Marceline, Once World-Famous Comedian," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 18, 1927, 6. For an example of Marceline attempting to leverage his fame to support his business, see "Marceline, Formerly of the Hippodrome, Wishes All His Friends a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year—Come and Drink the Old Year Out and New Year In with MARCELINE at his RESTAURANT at 230 West 38th Street," *Variety* 41, no. 3 (December 17, 1915): 36.

12. "Marceline, Formerly of the Hippodrome," 36.

13. David Robinson, "The Mysterious Marceline," in *Chaplin's "Limelight" and the Music Hall Tradition*, eds. Frank Scheide, Hooman Mehran, and Dan Kamin (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 135–43; 135.

14. "Theatre: Death of Marceline" *Time*, November 14, 1927, 48.

15. Chaplin, *My Autobiography*, 45.

16. Chaplin, *My Autobiography*, 46.

17. As Bryony Dixon has argued, Chaplin (like most of his contemporaries) was not prone to giving credit or highlighting his key influences. In his autobiography, however, he speaks of Marceline in a way that underlines his enthusiasm for the clown and suggests a lifelong interest in him. David Robinson has made a similar case, arguing that Marceline's appearance in Chaplin's autobiography, a comparative oddity, reflected a deep respect for the clown. See Bryony Dixon, "The Good Thieves: The Origins of Situation Comedy in the British Music Hall," in *Slapstick Comedy*, eds. Tom Paulus and Rob King

(New York: Routledge, 2010), 21–35; 22; and Robinson “The Mysterious Marceline,” 137. For Toto, see Cullen, Hackman, and McNeilly, *Vaudeville Old and New*, 1119–21.

18. For Grimaldi, see Andrew McConnell Stott, *The Pantomime Life of Joseph Grimaldi: Laughter, Madness, and the Story of Britain’s Greatest Comedian* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2010). For the rejection of *clown* as a label, see “Broadway Pauses to Offer Final Tribute to Marceline,” 6.

19. Chaplin, *My Autobiography*, 46.

20. John Corbin, “An Overflowing in the Gotham Theatres,” *New York Times*, September 16, 1923, 1.

21. Dash, “Frank ‘Slivers’ Oakley, ‘The Ball Game,’” review of full-stage performance, 125<sup>th</sup> Street Theater, New York, *Variety* 14, no. 7 (April 24, 1909): 13.

22. Corbin, “An Overflowing in the Gotham Theatres,” 1.

23. “Broadway Pauses to Offer Final Tribute to Marceline,” 6.

24. Marceline makes an appearance in a short biographical essay in Scheide, Mehram, and Kamin’s *Chaplin’s “Limelight” and the Music Hall Tradition* by Chaplin biographer David Robinson, but there is no substantive study of how Marceline specifically impacted this film. Robinson only draws an explicit link between Marceline and *Limelight* with a brief statement in which he notes that Marceline’s trousers are the same as those worn by Chaplin in the musical finale he shared with Buster Keaton. Likewise in his biography, Robinson implies that there is a connection between Marceline and *Limelight* but does not analyze how that specific influence might have manifested itself. Barry Anthony makes a similar omission, mentioning Marceline once but failing to consider the clown’s broader influence on his subject. Simon Louvish, in his analysis of Chaplin, fails even to mention Marceline’s name. Marceline the clown, then, has been intermittently connected with *Limelight* (and Chaplin), but serious consideration of the precise influence of the former over the latter is strikingly absent. See Robinson, “The Mysterious Marceline,” 135–43; Robinson, *Chaplin*, 34–36; Barry Anthony, *Chaplin’s Music Hall: The Chaplins and Their Circle in Limelight* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2012), 216; and Simon Louvish, *Chaplin: The Tramp’s Odyssey* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009).

25. For *Limelight’s* link to the British music hall tradition, see Scheide, Mehram, and Kamin, *Chaplin’s “Limelight,”* particularly Frank Scheide, “The Identity of Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Music Hall, *Limelight*, and the Tragedy of the Reformed Performer,” 111–19; David Robinson, “Chaplin Tribute to the Theatre of His Youth,” 107–10; and Bryony Dixon, “Harlequin in the New World,” 144–51.

26. Robinson, “The Mysterious Marceline,” 138.

27. Charles Chaplin, *My Life in Pictures* (London: Bodley Head, 1974), 300. For the Tinney scandal, see “Death Takes Frank Tinney,” *Warsaw (IN) Union*, November 30, 1940, 8; and “This Time it Isn’t the Woman Who ‘Pays, Pays, Pays,’” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 9, 1930, 27. For Tinney as inspiration for *Limelight*, see Glenn Mitchell, “Limelight: An Annotated Commentary,” in *Chaplin’s “Limelight,”* 5–15; 6. For a general introduction to Tinney, see Cullen, Hackman, and McNeilly, *Vaudeville Old and New*, 1111–13.

28. Cullen, Hackman, and McNeilly, *Vaudeville Old and New*, 719.
29. "Clown Ends Life as Fame Is Lost," *St. Petersburg (FL) Evening Independent*, November 10, 1927, 14.
30. Anthony, *Chaplin's Music Hall*, 216.
31. "Famous Clown Ends Life in New York," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 9, 1916, 18.
32. For Slivers and Marceline as comic partners, see "Dazzling Triumph of Stage Effects at the Hippodrome," *New York Morning Telegraph*, December 14, 1905, 10; "New Hippodrome Clown," *New York Times*, November 21, 1905, 13; and "Plays and Players of Today," *Day*, August 20, 1910, 7. For examples of the two being linked even after their deaths, see "Clown Ends Life," 14, "Theatre Gossip," *St. Petersburg (FL) Evening Independent*, November 8, 1927, 4; and O. O. McIntyre, "New York Letter," *Miami Daily News and Metropolis*, January 5, 1928, 6.
33. "Slivers, Famous as Clown, Ends His Life for Love," 5.
34. "Slivers, Famous as Clown, Ends His Life for Love," 5.
35. "Slivers, the Clown Suicide for a Girl," *New York Times*, March 9, 1916, 13.
36. "Slivers, the Clown Suicide for a Girl," 13.
37. Chaplin, *Limelight*, 24:06-27:53.
38. Chaplin, *Limelight*.
39. Chaplin, *My Autobiography*, 46.
40. "Clown Ends Life," 14.
41. "Broadway Pauses to Offer Final Tribute to Marceline," 6.
42. Chaplin, *Limelight*, 1:51:01-2:09:40.
43. Chaplin, *Limelight*, 9:17-13:08.
44. For a rare example of a post-fame mention of Marceline in the media, see "Clowns [sic] Sorrow Over Death of Famous Footlight," *Utica (NY) Morning Telegram*, September 8, 1921, 13.
45. "Clown Ends Life," 14; "New York Day by Day," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 5, 1928, 7.
46. "Theatre Gossip," 4.
47. For an example of Slivers reflecting on the difference between public perception and the reality of clowning, see "Circus Clown a Serious Person Outside the Ring," *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, May 15, 1910, 6.
48. For examples, see "Suicide of Marceline Due to Broken Heart," *Pittsburgh Press*, November 7, 1927, 24; "Slivers' Only Child Finds Good 'Mother,'" *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 10, 1916, 4; "Theatre: Death of Marceline," *Time*, November 14, 1927, 48; "Broadway Pauses to Offer," 6; "Slivers, Famous as Clown," 5, "Famous Clown Ends Life," 18; and "Slivers, The Clown Suicide," 13. Even in death, the memory of the pair continued to linger. For examples, see "Soon the Hippodrome, Too, Will Pass," *New York Sun*, May 21, 1930, 32; Dexter W. Fellows and Andrew A. Freeman, "This Way to the Big Show! Laugh, Pagliacci," *Ottawa Evening Citizen*, February 5, 1937, 17; Robert Carothers, letter to the editor, *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, April 2, 1942, 4; and "Clowns Bring Joy, Laughter to Circus," *Salt Lake Tribune*, September 21, 1986, 12.

49. Chaplin, *My Autobiography*, 46.

50. For *Limelight* as autobiography, see Louvish, *Chaplin*, 314–20.

51. “Marceline Is a Spaniard,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 7, 1912, 8.

52. “New Hippodrome Clown,” *New York Times*, November 21, 1905, 11.

53. Keaton, *The Cameraman*, 17:17-20:33.

54. “Orphan Day at the Circus,” *New York Sun*, April 17, 1907, 6.

55. “‘Jack Horner’ in Bad Shape,” *Variety* 4, no. 2 (September 22, 1906): 6.

56. For Keaton’s use of the body, see Alex Clayton, *The Body in Hollywood Slapstick* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), 46–66.

57. “Orphan Day,” 6.

58. Franklin and Franklin, “Interview with Buster Keaton, 1958,” 81; Feinstein, “Buster Keaton,” 132.

59. For an example of a vaudevillian establishing his importance based on audience responses rather than long-term impact, see Andrew L. Erdman, *Queen of Vaudeville: The Story of Eva Tanguay* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012). For an example of vaudevillians shaping long-term trends in popular culture, see William Howland Kenny III, “The Influence of Black Vaudeville on Early Jazz,” *The Black Perspective in Music*, 14, no. 3 (1986): 233–48.

60. Though little is ever said about it, even by contemporaries, Marceline did briefly attempt to forge a film career of his own. In 1915, he starred in *The Mishaps of Marceline*, sometimes referred to as *Marceline, the Window Cleaner*, which was summarized as follows in *Reel Life*, a contemporary film magazine: “Marceline is a professional window washer. He goes from store to store with his mop and pail. First he gets a job cleaning a jeweller’s plate glass front, where he works havoc among the priceless valuables on display. Next he applies at a grocery, where he deluges goods with soapy water. At last he winds up in a saloon and is set to washing mirrors in the back bar. His ladder slips, and a hundred dollars’ worth of glass goes crashing to ruin. *Marceline* is arrested and arraigned in court, where he has many other laughable adventures. No more popular comedian than the famous clown of the N.Y. Hippodrome is set to be seen on screen. His appearance with Thanouser marks his debut in motion pictures.” The film was released on March 7, 1915 but its impact was minimal, reflecting the rapidly accelerating decline in Marceline’s fortunes. An earlier film, *Marceline, the World Famous Clown of the Hippodrome*, was produced by Winthrop Moving pictures in 1907, but little is known concerning its content. Neither Marceline’s 1907 nor his 1915 films have survived. A very small fragment of the first is known to exist, though it is not widely available. See *Reel Life*, January 23, 1915, 21; *Reel Life*, February 13, 1915, 22; *Reel Life*, February 27, 1915, 10, 12, 15, 37; and Q. David Bowers, *Thanouser Films: An Encyclopaedia and History* (Portland: Thanouser Company Film Preservation, 1997).