When Karoline Schulze-Kummerfeld sat down to pen her memoirs, she brought to her writing desk a profound awareness of her life as a performance, both on the stage and off. As a professional actress, she had occupied an “in-between” space in German society, straddling many of the boundaries separating the bourgeois middle class from the nobility, public life from private life, men from women, and rich from poor. Although for much of her life she enjoyed a freedom and mobility unusual for a woman of her era, she had a profound understanding of the extent to which that mobility could be perceived and interpreted as transgressive and threatening to the bourgeois public to which she yearned to belong, and she knew that as an actress she was always already under suspicion not only of “unchasteness” but also of the debased theatricality that was the opposite of bourgeois virtue. During her life, Schulze-Kummerfeld experienced both the extreme mobility and publicity of the actress’s life and the stifling isolation and domesticity of bourgeois marriage. Her first-hand knowledge of these two very different modes of being ties her awareness of what it means to perform—both on and off the stage—to her understanding of her status as a woman in society. As a result, these memoirs provide insights into the cultural and social meanings of performance for women of the time and reveal many of the contradictions inherent in the demand for a virtuous, antitheatrical femininity. Paradoxically, although Schulze-Kummerfeld thought of herself in terms of authenticity, transparency, and naïveté—that is, as an antitheatrical subject—she was also aware of the extent to which, as a public person, she needed to defend her reputation.
and her image in the public sphere by mobilizing performances of herself that could ward off suspicion of her virtue. In many ways, her memoirs can be seen as both a chronicle of those performances and the performance of her lifetime—her final, definitive representation of her “self” to her public.

Recent studies of eighteenth-century women’s autobiographies have pointed out that such texts frequently represent complex negotiations with dominant ideas about gendered subjectivity. In addition, poststructuralist theory has led to a questioning of the historical and “truth” value of memoirs in general: the very act of representing one’s life in words renders that life to some degree fictive, no matter how close the author approaches historical accuracy. One model of reading autobiographical texts sees the text as a conscious, half-conscious, or unconscious “performance” of identity produced and contoured in response to, or reaction against, social and discursive pressures toward a fixed and “natural” gendered identity. This is, of course, a twentieth-century perspective: an eighteenth-century memoir writer like Karoline Schulze-Kummerfeld understood her subjectivity and her writing about that subjectivity quite differently. She claims to “know” herself and the “truth” of her life with a confidence that historical hindsight and current theory find at best quaint, and, at worst, suspect. Yet reading her text as a “performance”—against her specific intentions to have it stand as the “truth” of her life—is particularly compelling in the case of Karoline Schulze-Kummerfeld because it helps to illuminate the contradictory subject position into which women of the late eighteenth century were interpellated by contemporary discourse, which equated ideal femininity with antitheatricality.

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SCHULZE-KUMMERFELD’S MEMOIRS: GENESIS AND SUMMARY

Karoline Schulze-Kummerfeld (1745–1815) spent more than half of her life working and living in the theater. Her autobiographical