“To copy her frame, where divinity’s seal is, Would beggar the talents of fam’d Praxiteles, See Psyche amaz’d as she turns to behold Such excellence cast in so perfect a mould.”

Elizabeth Farren, on whose behalf Anthony Pasquin issued this poetic challenge to artists, was the reigning Queen of Comedy of the London stage. The challenge was accepted by many artists, but none achieved the success of Thomas Lawrence, whose masterpiece, an extraordinarily beautiful portrait of Elizabeth Farren, was first shown at the Royal Academy in 1790. A hundred and sixty years later, in 1950, it was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum.

Visitors to the Annual Exhibition of the Royal Academy were quick to single out Lawrence’s Portrait of an Actress for praise, mingled with some criticism. The painting was compared “not unfavorably” to another picture on the north wall of the gallery, Mrs. Billington as Saint Cecilia, by the august president of the Royal Academy, the aging Sir Joshua Reynolds. Reynolds himself, at the private view of the exhibition, said to Lawrence, “You have already achieved a masterpiece, and the world will naturally look to you to perfect that which I have endeavored to improve; I am not sure but you have deserved the prize.”

Although some insatiable critics complained that the artist was inconsistent in presenting feminine and her smile fascinates the heart as her form delights the eye.” And Hazlitt speaks of “Miss Farren, with her fine-lady airs and grace, with that elegant turn of her head and motion of her fan and tripping of her tongue.” This impression of elegance and animation is completely captured by Lawrence.

But as usual, the subject of the portrait had a few suggestions and requests for changes to make to the painter. She wrote to Lawrence, “You will think me the most troublesome of all human beings, but, indeed, it is not my own fault; they tease me to death about this picture, and insist upon my writing to you. One says it is so thin in the figure that you might
blow it away; another, that it looks broke in the middle. In short, you must make it a little fatter, at all events diminish the bend you are so attached to, even if it makes the picture look ill, for the owner of it is quite distressed about it at present. I am shocked to tease you, and dare-say you wish me and the portrait in the fire; but as it was impossible to appease the cries of my friends, I must beg you to excuse me.”

Lawrence exerted his great personal charm to convince the lovely Miss Farren that no changes really were necessary. And so the portrait stands before us today with all the freshness of the artist’s first conception of his subject, unhampered by attempts to suit the taste of this critic or that.

The portrait occasioned so much discussion and was so popular that it was promptly engraved in mezzotint by Bartolozzi’s pupil, Charles Knight, and the print was subsequently issued, in great numbers, as the work of Bartolozzi. A comparison of the print with the painting shows that several inches at the lower edge of the painting have been trimmed off—marring, somewhat, the effect of the composition.

Elizabeth Farren, who was about twenty-eight when Lawrence painted her, was born in Cork. Her father, a surgeon apothecary and actor, was a descendant of Huguenots who fled France on the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, her mother was the daughter of a once prosperous Liverpool brewer. Her parents joined a company of itinerant players, and after her father’s death the young Elizabeth and her two sisters acted with their mother to make a meager living. After some success in Liverpool Elizabeth Farren was introduced to George Colman, the manager of the Haymarket Theater in London. He presented her to London audiences in 1777 as Kate Hardcastle in Goldsmith’s comedy She Stoops to Conquer, in which she was very well received by audience and critics alike.

The following year she was the original Nancy Lovel in Colman’s The Suicide. Disguised as Dick Rattler, a “breeches part,” her very slender figure was revealed, her grace and symmetry vanished, and she was declared to be “all in one straight line from head to foot.” Her slimness, a far cry from the well-rounded figure so in vogue at the time, occasioned some satirical remarks, and Charles James Fox was so disillusioned that he ceased his attentions to her. However, Miss Farren was soon restored to public favor by her portrayal of Lady Townley in The Provoked Husband.

In 1778 she made her first appearance at Drury Lane as Charlotte Rusport in The West Indian. She was widely acclaimed for her portrayals of “the fashionable lady of the period, wielding her fan with dexterity and grace,” in the sparkling comedies of Goldsmith and of Sheridan, who was part owner and director of the Drury Lane Theater. She played a great variety of roles—her Lady Townley and Lady Teazle were far more successful than the more dramatic characterizations required for Shakespeare’s heroines, Juliet, Portia, or Hermione. In 1781 she created the role of Almeida in Pratt’s The Fair Circassian, a performance which gave rise to at least one facetious engraving.

Through the introduction of the Duchess of Leinster, who knew the Farren family in Ireland, Elizabeth became acquainted with Ed-
Elizabeth Farren (1762-1829), British actress, later the Countess of Derby, by Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830). Bequest of Edward S. Harkness, 1940
ward Stanley, twelfth Earl of Derby, himself a clever amateur actor, chiefly remembered today as the founder of England's most famous horse race. Lord Derby was separated from his wife, Lady Elizabeth Hamilton, who was carrying on a notorious affair with the Earl of Dorset. Derby soon became a devoted admirer of Miss Farren's, and their attachment was the subject of many caricatures as early as 1781.

Horace Walpole, in his voluminous correspondence, frequently mentioned Lord Derby's constancy to Miss Farren and commented, "in the evening we went together to Miss Farren's, and besides her duenna-mother, found her at piquet with her unalterable Earl. Apropos, I have observed of late years, that when Earls take strong attachments, they are more steady than other men."

Ten years later, in 1797, shortly after the death of his estranged wife, Lord Derby's constancy was rewarded and Elizabeth Farren retired from the stage to become his countess.

In 1790, when Lawrence painted Miss Farren, he was not quite twenty-one. He had been a student at the Royal Academy School for three years and was eager to make a reputation in London. With this portrait he transformed himself from a student to a master and at one stroke, so to speak, leaped to the very top rank as a painter. He won the favor of the king and upon Reynolds' death in 1792 succeeded him as Painter-in-Ordinary to the King.

Not unlike another young artist of precious talents who evolved into a fashionable painter of high society, Anthony van Dyck, Lawrence soon exchanged his youthful exuberance in painting for a practiced ease in turning out stylish insipidities to an almost mechanical formula. Such dashing elegance and spontaneity as are to be found throughout the portrait of Miss Farren, become increasingly rare in Lawrence's later work. But in this portrait his best qualities as an artist are seen to their greatest advantage—here he paints with a fresh, unjaded hand, with enthusiasm, with freedom and crispness, with a love of paint and his own facility in handling it. Here Lawrence shows himself a true precursor of the French Impressionists. The paint is marvelously well handled and its texture differentiates between the softness of the fur collar and muff, the glossy sheen of the white satin cloak, the smoothness of the kid glove, and the velvety blue ribbon, with astonishing dexterity. The whole portrait, from the powdered hair to the flowing sheer dress is a masterpiece of painting, of white on white sharply accented by the brown fur and the blue ribbon.

This superb painting, the epitome of the English eighteenth-century portrait, is Lawrence's finest achievement, rarely equaled and never surpassed. He caught Miss Farren in the full bloom of her beauty at a moment when he was at the peak of his skill and contrived a matchless portrait of an epoch.

In 1792, after protracted negotiations, the Earl of Derby succeeded in buying the painting from Lawrence, who had raised the price from his original sixty guineas to one hundred. It was inherited by the only surviving child of Elizabeth Farren and the Earl of Derby, Mary Margaret, who married the Earl of Wilton. The portrait remained in the Wilton family until about 1897 when the sitter's grandson, the fourth Earl of Wilton sold it to L. Neumann. Shortly after 1904 it was acquired by J. Pierpont Morgan and hung in his house at Princes Gate, London, until 1913, when it was sent to this country. Mr. Morgan lent the painting to this Museum in 1913 for exhibition. From the collection of the younger J. P. Morgan the portrait passed to the collection of Edward S. Harkness, who bequeathed it to the Museum.