

“Stage-plays [...] and a thousand other amusements now in use”: Garrick’s response
to antitheatrical discourse in the mid-eighteenth century

In September 1750, the *Universal Magazine* published a cautionary tale about the perils of theatregoing. Eugenia, an unexceptionable young lady “whose natural sweetness and benevolence of disposition was improved by a virtuous education,” is ruined after her seducer cunningly takes her “frequently to those plays, which he knew had a natural tendency to soften and unguard the mind”; once Eugenia’s “passions had been heightened by some very loose scenes,” all is lost (128).¹ The conclusion drawn by “Phocius,” the pseudonymous author of the piece, is not that the theatre is therefore irredeemably immoral, however. Instead, the opening sentence opines that “The amusements of the theatre are capable of the greatest benefit, when rationally applied; but of the most pernicious consequence, when its productions tend so manifestly to promote infidelity and licentiousness,” thus encapsulating the view that had been widely current since Jeremy Collier’s *A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage* of 1698 ignited two decades of blast and counter-blast earlier in the century.² If it is possible to generalize about attitudes towards the morality of the theatre in the eighteenth century, this would be the most plausible candidate: time after time, in commentary of the period, it is agreed that “the amusement of the stage” *can* be morally useful and “emulate to [*sic*] virtue, with more efficacy, very often, than well-wrote treatises” (129); the fault lies not in theatrical

¹ This story was reprinted in *The Ladies Magazine* for October 6, 1750, under the title, ‘The bad Consequences of Vicious Plays’.

² As Jonas Barish explains, for all his hostility to the stage, Collier was also an indefatigable dramatic critic at least ostensibly devoted to the possibility of “what his Puritan ancestors, and many of his own more zealous supporters, would have died rather than admit – that under certain circumstances and with proper controls, the theater might still hope to become a ‘religious and solemn’ adjunct to the Christian life” (228). More recently, John O’Brien has commented that “Collier’s ultimate goal in defending the authority of the church is to heal the breach between ritual practices and mere diversion that he takes the English stage of his own era to epitomize, to return to what he claims was the more fully integrated culture of the ancient world, when entertainment was placed in the service of religion, which was in turn intimately connected to the life of the state” (52).

representation, but in the choice of what to represent.³ Eugenia was exposed to the *wrong* plays (although, tantalisingly, we are not told precisely which plays these were; or indeed just which particular scenes of which play it was that sealed her fate).⁴

This temporizing view – that theatre could be manipulated to serve either moral or immoral purposes and thus needed reform rather than abolition – was not shared by all, of course. For John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister writing in 1757, the very equivocation of theatre, its mutable capacity to edify or corrupt, was at the heart of its potential for harm. Theatre’s “main design,” he explains, is “to please, or attempt to do so [...]; how far it pollutes or purifies is accidental” (14). As Johnson put it: “The drama’s law the drama’s patrons give, / For we that live to please, must please to live.”⁵ The root of theatrical endeavour lay in pleasing an audience – in being at the mercy of its spectators for success or failure. For critics such as Witherspoon this rendered the possibility of a morally impeccable theatre practically unimaginable. Most of what is “there represented, must have [...] a pernicious tendency”:

³ Numerous examples of the expression of this view can be found throughout the century. See, for example, *The Rational Rosciad* (1767), in which “F. B. L.” writes, “The stage was for the noblest end design’d; / To form, reform, exalt, and purge the mind; / [...] Then if perverted from th’intended use, / Blame not its institution, but abuse” (2-3), or the *Monthly Review* for April 1767, which condemned the antitheatrical pamphlet *The Stage the High Road to Hell* (1767) as “an extravagant rant” and “a weak performance, with respect to argument,” and asserted that although “the licentiousness of some characters and passages” in some plays showed “the expediency of reforming and improving our dramatic exhibitions, it by no means proves the necessity of totally abolishing them: On the contrary, it would be no difficult matter to demonstrate, in opposition to every thing advanced by this writer, that plays may be rendered not only an innocent and polite diversion, but greatly subservient to the interests of morality and virtue” (326).

⁴ We can, of course, make educated guesses – Restoration comedies such as Etherege’s *Man of Mode* (1676) and Congreve’s *Love for Love* (1695) were increasingly seen as indecent. Consultation of *The London Stage* shows that *The Man of Mode* was still performed from time to time until mid-century; it was revived once at Covent Garden in 1766 after a lapse of eleven years and then dropped out of the repertory; *Love for Love* continued to be hold its place, but in Burney’s *Evelina* the heroine hopes she will “never see it represented again; for it is so extremely indelicate” (78). Numerous commentators condemned the licentiousness of Congreve’s work (O’Toole, 127).

⁵ From the prologue written for the opening of Drury Lane in 1747, the beginning of Garrick’s first season as manager (208).

This is evident, because they must be to the taste and relish of the bulk of those who attend it. [...] whatever the authors are able or willing to do, it is certain, that their productions in fact, can rise no higher in point of purity, than the audience shall be willing to receive. Their attendance is not constrained, but voluntary; nay, they pay dearly for their entertainment; and therefore they must, and will have it to their taste. (31)⁶

For Witherspoon, theatre is one of many amusements improper for Christians to enjoy; if everyone remembered the Biblical tenet that “*whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God,*” “stage-plays, nay, and a thousand other amusements now in use, would never have been heard of” (15). Such a conflation of theatre-going with other morally dubious pleasures has a long history, appearing even in Ben Jonson’s prose work *Discoveries* where, as Jonas Barish has pointed out, “the craze for playgoing appears along with other frivolous pursuits as a symbol of childishness and abdication of judgment on the part of grown men” (134).⁷ In the third epistle of his poem *The Christian Minister* (1772), published to give “some useful Hints to young Ministers and Students” (v), Thomas Gibbons classes plays with gambling and recommends instead fresh air and exercise as the appropriate amusements of a dissenting minister:

For your Diversions and Amusements choose

Such as are innocent, and best relieve

⁶ Witherspoon’s view, ironically and yet fittingly, is echoed in *A Dialogue in the Green-Room* (1763). Probably by Thaddeus Fitzpatrick, this pamphlet was written against the abolition of half-price entry to the play-house at the end of the third act, and announced in the course of the argument that “the sole business of the managers and performers [was] to please and divert the auditors” (McPherson, 244). This is not to say, of course, that control over what was offered in the London theatres was wielded unproblematically by the audience rather than the managements – as John O’Brien has pointed out, London theatres displayed “one of the key features of what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer dubbed the ‘culture industry,’ as they offered pretty much the same thing while characterizing it as choice” (7).

⁷ Barish goes on to cite this passage from *Timber, or Discoveries* (1640-41): “What a deale of cold busines doth a man mis-spend the better part of life in! in scattering *complements*, tendring *visits*, gathering and venting *newes*, following *Feasts* and *Playes*, making a little winter-love in a darke corner” (134).

The Mind emerging from it [sic] studious Cares:
Not Cards, and Dice, and Plays, that oft seduce
Th'enchanted Mind to Vanity and Guilt,
And Life's best Hours insatiably devour,
But mount the Steed, and let the rural Air
Of wearied Nature fan the fainting Flame, [...] (68)

Such an easy collapsing of any distinction between theatre and other “amusements” was something with which many commentators grappled, and the question of what distinctions should be made applied not only to the comparison of entertainment offered by the theatre with that at other venues, but to the varied entertainments available *within* the theatres themselves. The increasing popularity of such dramatic genres as opera, pantomime and dance was viewed with an unenthusiastic eye by those who felt that what they saw as legitimate theatre – the serious spoken drama, whether tragedy or comedy – was qualitatively different from things such as these, which were seen as coming more properly into an alternative category, most easily labelled “spectacle.” In April 1735, *Fog's Weekly Journal* alluded to the role of “Too great an Attention to Theatrical Entertainments” in “enervat[ing] the gravest and wisest People of ancient *Greece*,” but still felt “there was something to be said in Defence of these Dramatick Entertainments,” which “might have been writ with a Design to recommend Virtue and Honour”:

[...] tho' the People might run to see them with a View of being diverted, yet
[...] they might come away from the Sight of one of those Dramas with better Sentiments than they had before they saw it; nay some Instruction might be drawn even from the Comedies: Men might learn to avoid some Follies, and to leave off some silly Habits, which might render them ridiculous in private

Life, which certainly is of some Use; but I would fain know whether a Man ever returned wiser from an Opera than he was before he went to it, except he repented and laughed at his own Folly, for having given so much Money for a Song. [...] and lastly, let me ask whether any body supposes that a young Woman returns from a Masquerade with more Virtue or Modesty about her than she had before she went to it.

The progress in this passage from potentially edifying plays, to useless operas and morally risky masquerades suggests the way in which the proponents of so-called serious drama felt that it was constantly under threat of condemnation from its very presence on the same sliding scale as public entertainments of all kinds.⁸

Understandably, theatrical professionals of the period were particularly sensitive to the effects of this perceived continuum. Thus it is that even those who supported and indeed worked in the theatres could be found themselves employing the arguments of antitheatrical discourse in their efforts to justify their position. As I show in what follows, this is even the case in plays that clearly attempt to counter antitheatrical arguments; indeed such attempts seem, paradoxically, to march unavoidably with a reinforcement of antitheatrical sentiment.

Colley Cibber, whose *Apology* (1740) drew on his experiences as a very successful actor, playwright and manager over several decades, repeatedly criticizes the “montrous Presentations” (56), “Trash and Fopperies” (67), “Trash and Filth of Buffoonery, and Licentiousness” (156) that made up, in his view, too much of the programme of London’s theatres as they multiplied in the early eighteenth century:

⁸ Gillian Russell’s approach in *Women, Sociability and Theatre in Georgian London*, in which she proposes “foregrounding [theatre’s] relationship with other venues and modes of entertainment” (13), and John O’Brien’s sense that in British culture of the eighteenth century, “the concept of entertainment seemed to claim an increasingly large share of the public sphere” (xix) attest to the importance of both recognizing the period’s own sense of theatre’s position within an increasingly diverse and complex world of entertainment and incorporating that recognition into modern critical readings of eighteenth-century drama and culture.

“How,” he asked, “could the same Stock of Plays supply four Theatres, which (*without such additional Entertainments, as a Nation of common Sense ought to be ashamed of*) could not well support two?” (162, my emphasis). In Cibber’s view, a proliferation of venues means a general lowering of standards: in a time of short runs and a relatively limited audience, there are simply not enough good plays (that is, plays of both moral and dramatic value) to go around.⁹ Thus, it is better for both theatre and morality if the number of venues is limited – Cibber was a keen supporter of the Licensing Act and believed “that as I allow nothing is more liable to debase, and corrupt the Minds of a People, than a licentious Theatre; so, under a just, and proper Establishment, it were possible to make it, as apparently the School of Manners, and of Virtue” (196). For Cibber, furthermore, “licentiousness” and “trash” do not inevitably go together. While plays may contain licentiousness, trash is largely associated with spectacle in his mind: whatever the faults of some plays, “a good Play is certainly the most rational and the highest Entertainment, that human Invention can produce” (100).

Cibber, however, like Garrick after him (and as Johnson and Witherspoon emphasized), could not avoid the bottom line. Pantomimes, he admitted, were used “as Crutches to our weakest Plays” (281), while a successful “spectacle” such as “the Coronation-Ceremony of *Anna Bullen*,” “for forty Days together has brought more Money [*sic*], to the House, than the best Play that was ever writ” (293).¹⁰ Garrick himself occupied the anomalous position of being a prime mover in the promotion both of “old comedy” (witness his many adaptations of plays by not only Shakespeare

⁹ It is interesting to note that here Cibber makes an argument very similar to Witherspoon’s, although for Witherspoon even “one society of players” cannot be kept “in constant employment, without a mixture of many more [plays] that are confessedly pernicious” (8). However, Cibber was (inevitably) somewhat more optimistic than Witherspoon when it came to the possibility of effective stage regulation.

¹⁰ This particular spectacle seems to have been inserted into a play – in this case, *Virtue Betray’d; or Anna Bullen* by John Banks (1726).

but also by writers such as Shirley, Beaumont and Fletcher) and of Shakespeare as the nation's premier serious dramatist, while at the same time being an extremely successful exploiter of the popularity of spectacle in various forms, including pantomime and opera.¹¹ The most popular afterpieces of the period were those that employed spectacle – Garrick's own *The Jubilee* (1769) for example, which helped recoup the losses incurred by the largely disastrous and hugely expensive Stratford Jubilee earlier the same year, or the many and much-performed harlequinades. In the 1756-57 season, for example, examination of *The London Stage* shows that the three most frequently performed afterpieces were the harlequinades *Mercury Harlequin* and *Harlequin Sorcerer* (thirty-seven and thirty-five performances respectively), and the pantomime *Orpheus and Eurydice* (twenty-seven performances), followed by *Harlequin's Frolic* (nineteen) and *Harlequin Skeleton* (eighteen). The only two plays to come close to such success that year were Foote's farce *The Author*, with nineteen performances, and Garrick's *Lilliput* (sixteen) – which itself contained a strong dose of spectacle. (The only mainpieces to in any way rival such numbers that season were Centlivre's *The Wonder: A Woman Keeps a Secret*, with twenty-four performances, and *Romeo and Juliet*, with fifteen.)

Garrick's output as a dramatist – counting both original works and adaptations – was extensive, and it exemplified the full range of material about which contemporary commentators debated, from full-length plays such as *The Clandestine Marriage* (1766) on the one hand and spectacular afterpieces on the other. Between

¹¹ As Ian McIntyre writes, in the course of discussing Garrick's opera *The Fairies* (1765): "For all his attachment to Shakespeare and the 'old comedies' and his professed contempt for rope-dancers and the like, Garrick knew very well that the public taste for music and colour and movement was not something the manager of Drury Lane could legislate out of existence; indeed, in the mid-1750s all the signs were that the appetite for pantomime, opera and any sort of spectacle was growing" (226). Arguably, what linked the various kinds of "spectacle" together was the retreat from the spoken word: music, gesture, and elaborate staging replaced speech. O'Brien suggests that the animosity towards pantomime of writers such as Richardson, Fielding, and Lillo "probably derives in part from their realization that its silent motion and extraordinary popularity might displace modes of performance centered on the word" (xvii).

these poles – the one at least potentially able to be incorporated into an argument for the theatre’s moral utility, the other an object widely condemned in commentary by both supporters of theatre and its enemies – lay what was arguably Garrick’s most fertile ground: the “*petite pièce*,” the short farce or brief comedy of two or three acts. In these, he returned repeatedly to the question of theatre’s position within the contemporary world of amusements, perhaps most famously in *Harlequin’s Invasion* (1759), in which, as Richard Bevis has pointed out, “he dramatized the threat posed to legitimate theatre by pantomimes, burlettas, scenic spectacles” (218). In the remainder of this article, I now wish to turn my attention to particular examples of this characteristic concern.¹² In the first case, *A Peep Behind the Curtain; or, the New Rehearsal* (1767), Garrick exploits and examines one of the alternative amusements available within the theatre itself (in this instance, a burletta), while in *Bon Ton; or, High Life Above Stairs* (1775), it is fashionable amusements more widely – “Pantheons, Operas, Festinos, Coteries, Masquerades, and all the Devilades in this town,” as one character has it – that form the play’s target (1.1.195).¹³

In *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Drama*, Bevis characterized *A Peep Behind the Curtain* as “half-sop, half-satire” (222), a judgment that recognizes the play’s success in both indulging and mocking popular taste. Similarly, in a 1981 essay Phyllis T. Dircks emphasized “Garrick’s particular contribution in setting this form within a satiric play so as to make the burletta both the agent and object of the satire” (136). But the burletta – the principal sop to current taste – is contained within the second act of the two-act play, and the details of the framing plot, as yet given very little critical attention, are instructive in their capacity to meditate shrewdly on the

¹² As well as *Harlequin’s Invasion*, *A Peep Behind the Curtain*, and *Bon Ton*, examples of Garrick’s short plays in which the question of the theatre’s place within the range of modern entertainment is considered include the very popular *Lethe* (1745), *The Meeting of the Company* (1774), and *The Theatrical Candidates* (1775).

¹³ References are to act, scene, and page number.

very tensions of the contemporary theatrical scene embodied by the play itself. Where Buckingham's original *Rehearsal* (1671) gave no quarter in its satirical treatment of heroic tragedy, Garrick's mini rehearsal play is able both to cater to audience appetite for spectacle – by staging the first act of *Orpheus* – and to set that appetite within the context of a layered theatrical world that includes everyone from the women who sweep the stage and the carpenters who make the set to the prompter, the manager, the author, and the audience both onstage and off. The formula was a distinct success – in its opening season (1767-68), *A Peep Behind the Curtain* was performed twenty-five times and thus outstripped, if narrowly, popular pantomimes such as Garrick's own *Harlequin's Invasion* (twenty-three performances) and others such as *The Royal Chace or Harlequin Skeleton* (twenty) and *Orpheus and Eurydice* (twenty-two). (Still, Drury Lane's most successful afterpiece that season by some distance was *The Elopement*, a new pantomime performed thirty-six times.)

A Peep Behind the Curtain shows us the preparations for and the staging of a rehearsal of one act of a new burletta, *Orpheus*.¹⁴ Attending the rehearsal are stage-struck aristocrats Sir Toby and Lady Fuz, with their daughter Miss Fuz and man of fashion Sir Macaroni Virtu. What neither the theatre staff nor Sir Toby and Lady Fuz realise is that an impecunious young relation of the Fuz family, Wilson, who has inveigled his way into their good graces in the guise of a strolling player, is also in the play-house and plans to elope with Miss Fuz. In many ways, *A Peep Behind the Curtain* can look at first glance like an antitheatrical piece of theatre that confirms all the worst fears about the baleful effects of the stage expressed by critics like Witherspoon or Thomas Gibbons. In the first scene, Wilson discusses his plans for elopement with his friend Mervin, explaining why he chose the guise of a strolling

¹⁴ A topical choice of subject for satire: as Direks points out, Orpheus was “a figure well-known to both the opera and the play-house stages” of the period, from Monteverdi and Gluck to pantomime, as above, and farce (143).

player last summer “to have a pretence of being near [Miss Fuz’s] father’s house.” He could “gain the favour of Sir Toby’s family, as a strolling player, which [he] could not as a poor relation,” since the family

are fond of acting to madness, and my plan succeeded; I was so alter’d they did not know me – they lik’d me much, came to a Benefit, which I pretended to have, invited me to their house, and Miss met me privately, after I had played *Ranger* and *Lothario*. (1. 1. 3)¹⁵

Here Miss Fuz can clearly be seen as a descendant of the *Universal Magazine*’s unfortunate Eugenia, in this case worryingly seduced by watching such staples of the repertoire as Benjamin Hoadly’s *The Suspicious Husband* (1747) and Rowe’s *The Fair Penitent* (1703).¹⁶ With metatheatrical irony, Mervin confirms the antitheatrical prejudice that watching plays is fatal for female virtue, readily agreeing, “Aye, aye, when a young lady’s head is crammed with combustible scraps of plays—she is always ready prim’d, and will *go off* (if you will allow me a pun) the very first opportunity” (1. 1. 3). Accordingly, Wilson gains access to the play-house by persuading the manager to take him on as a tragic actor and under cover of the rehearsal of *Orpheus* (which takes up the majority of the play’s second act), Wilson and Miss Fuz succeed in eloping.

This tale of the seductive dangers of the theatre is complicated, however, not only by the abiding irony of expressing anti-theatrical sentiments within a play, but also by Wilson’s status – he is really a gentleman, not an actor – and by his back story. Marriage to Miss Fuz is his route to re-acquiring a fortune unfairly lost by his

¹⁵ References are to act, scene, and page number.

¹⁶ Both plays held their places in the repertory until the end of the century and beyond, and both figured in the 1767-68 season: *The Fair Penitent* was staged four times by Covent Garden, while Drury Lane performed *The Suspicious Husband* five times. (Coincidentally, *The Fair Penitent* was playing at Covent Garden on the night of *A Peep*’s premier at Drury Lane.) One might also think of Evelina’s rapture after her first visit to Drury Lane on arrival in London, to see *The Suspicious Husband*: “O how I envied Clarinda. I almost wished to have jumped on the stage and joined them” (Burney, 28).

father, in circumstances that remain hazy, to Sir Toby's uncle; the planned elopement will bring back the fortune (Miss Fuz is worth "near thirty thousand pounds") and Wilson will "get a good wife into the bargain." Not only did Sir Toby's family somehow deprive Wilson of his fortune, they were also guilty of reprehensible meanness: "My mother, at my father's death, took me a boy to Sir Toby and my Lady, to solicit their kindness for me—He gave me half a crown to buy ginger-bread, and her Ladyship, who was combing a fat lap-dog, mutter'd—*There was no end of maintaining poor relations*" (1. 1. 2). Furthermore, if Miss Fuz is initially seduced by Wilson's performances as stage-rakes such as Ranger and Lothario, she is not deceived into eloping: Wilson has already revealed his true identity to her, "and her generosity was so great, that she resolved to marry me to make amends" (1. 1. 3). When Lady Fuz discovers that the couple have escaped while she was absorbed in watching the rehearsal of *Orpheus*, she accuses Glib, the author, and Patent, the manager, of complicity in the plan: "Was this your plot, Mr. Glib? Or your contrivance, Mr. Manager? [...] 'tis one of your Stage-players has run away with my daughter; --and I'll be reveng'd on you all;--I'll shut up your house" (2. 1. 42). Lady Fuz and Sir Toby leave in haste to follow the young couple; on returning from making enquiries Patent tells Glib: "'Tis true, Mr. Glib,—the young Lady is gone off, but with nobody that belongs to us—'tis a dreadful affair!" (2. 1. 44). While one could quibble that Patent at this point should presumably believe the young man *was* an actor (hired by him as a tragic hero, as Wilson tells us earlier), the truth is that Wilson doesn't "belong to" the theatre and is not, as Lady Fuz assumes, "one of your Stage-players:" the elopement of Miss Fuz is accomplished not as a result of the parlous immorality of the theatre and its people, but rather as the combined product of Sir Toby and Lady's Fuz's meanness on the one hand and their "mad" "fondness" for acting on the

other. The problem in *A Peep Behind the Curtain* lies with foolish amateurs, not with the professionals.¹⁷

This distinction between professionals and over-enthusiastic amateurs is underscored in the play in the metatheatrical manipulation, familiar on the eighteenth-century stage, of the actors in relation to their onstage characters. Lady Fuz, for example, was played by Kitty Clive, then one of the most successful and well-known of all leading actresses. Disappointed in her request for a demonstration of “thunder and lightning,” Lady Fuz declares her wish to go into the Green Room: “Is Clive there?—I should be glad of all things to see that woman off the stage.” Glib explains that Clive “never attends here, but when she is wanted,” to which Lady Fuz responds, “Bless me! If I was an actress, I should never be a moment out of the Play-house” (1. 2. 23). This metatheatrical moment achieves several things. Lady Fuz’s casually rude reference to Clive as “that woman” suggests the combination of fascination and superiority with which upper-class audience members might have regarded actors. Glib’s information that Clive only comes to the play-house when necessary is a tacit acknowledgement of both her professionalism and her virtuous reputation – Lady Fuz’s naïve declaration that she would “never be a moment out of the Play-house” were she an actress reflects her utter incomprehension of the reality of an actress’s life, and all of this is given added zest when spoken by Clive herself.¹⁸ As with the

¹⁷ Arthur Murphy’s *The Apprentice* (1756) had earlier addressed this topic in specific relation to the effect of an infatuation with acting on those of lower rank. Kitty Clive spoke the Epilogue, in which she warned the stage-struck tradesman or woman that “Little do those silly People know, / What dreadful Trials – Actors undergo” and concluded with the advice: “Young Men beware and shun our slipp’ry Ways, / Study Arithmetic, and burn your Plays; / And you, ye Girls, let not our Tinsel Train / Enchant your Eyes, and turn your madd’ning Brain; / Be timely wise, for oh! be sure of this! -- / A Shop with Virtue, is the Height of Bliss” (n. p.). See also p. 20 and n.23 below.

¹⁸ Writing of visiting the actress Jane Barsanti in 1775, Frances Burney comments, “she <continues> so good a Girl, living wholly with her mother & being almost always at Home, except when obliged to be at the Theatre, that I think she deserves calls, the attention & kindness which can be paid to her” (Troide, 2: 81). See my “‘An Unsullied Reputation in the Midst of Danger:’ Barsanti, Propriety and Performance in Burney’s *Early Journals and Letters*,” *Women’s Writing* 19.4 (2012): 525-543. For further discussion of the interplay between character and actress in *A Peep*, see Nussbaum, 170-72.

accomplishment of the elopement by “nobody that belongs to” the theatre, the tacit reference to Clive’s unsullied personal reputation challenges the apparent antitheatricalism of the play’s framing plot.

If aspects of *A Peep* work in this way, however, the second act’s play-within-a-play then exploits the popularity of spectacular musical entertainments, in a move that both distances theatre from and yet implicates it in the production of audience-pleasing fodder of morally dubious import. This double effect is achieved partly through the interplay between Patent and Glib: as well as staging to comical effect, as has been pointed out, the trials and tribulations managers faced when dealing with authors, these figures offer contrasting representations of theatrical imperatives. In conversation, Glib combines arrogance and anxiety, setting out the details of his nonsensical burletta at length while constantly seeking approval. His speeches are peppered with nervous laughter – “ha, ha, ha!” – and requests for reassurance that are partly rhetorical – “You understand me?” Patent is drawn as a somewhat long-suffering and less expansive character, subject to undefined pressures (“we cou’d not withstand the solicitations that were made to us”) that have caused him to agree to the novel and expensive proceeding of rehearsing, as the Prompter exclaims, “one act of a performance, and with dresses and decorations, as if it were really before an Audience” (1. 2. 10-11). While it is never spelt out, the action of the play implies that it is the influence of rich patrons Sir Toby and Lady Fuz that has forced Patent to mount this unusual and elaborate rehearsal for Glib.

Glib explains the plot of his *Orpheus*, in which the hero, struck with “a qualm of conscience,” “quits his mistress, and sets out for hell with a resolution to fetch his wife.” This is what we see in the scene performed in act 2 of *A Peep*; Glib, however,

also fills us in regarding the content of the second, never-to-be-performed, act of his burletta:

[...] as he approaches and gets into the infernal regions, his principles melt away by degrees, as it were, by the heat of the climate—and finding that his wife, Eurydice, is kept by Pluto, he immediately makes up to Proserpine, and is kept by her, then they all four agree matters amicably—Change partners, as one may say, make a genteel partie quarée, and finish the whole with a song and a chorus— [...] (14)

The cheerful immorality of the burletta's proposed ending is reminiscent in its good-natured partner-swapping of Dryden's *Marriage à-la-Mode*, when the four lovers of the comic plot consider (if only very briefly) the possibility of "a blessed community betwixt us four, for the solace of the women and relief of the men" (5. 1. 353-4). But Dryden's play had long been absent from the stage; it was first supplanted by Colley Cibber's adaptation *The Comical Lovers* (1707), which axed the heroic plot completely and removed many of the more risqué lines in accordance with changing tastes, until that too dropped out of the repertory.¹⁹ Glib's intended dénouement could never have been staged, even as the "true satire" (14) he desires; Patent sees this, warning Glib to "Take care [...] not to make it so much above proof that the boxes can't take it—Take care of empty boxes" (15), just as he sees the possibility that making Cerberus' three heads sing a trio may not go down well with the critics. Positioned as the figure with whose point of view the audience is invited to sympathize, Patent's brief but sufficiently doubtful responses to Glib's descriptions of

¹⁹ The last performance of *The Comical Lovers* was in 1752. (It did, however, have another lease of life, albeit brief, when it was adapted as an afterpiece entitled *Celadon and Florimel; or, the Happy Counterplot* by John Philip Kemble, staged once in the 1795-96 season.)

his intentions firmly consign the burletta to the category of the laughably absurd.²⁰

Patent and the audience are implicitly brought together in tacit agreement that the burletta is ludicrous – while at the same time both connive in its success, the one as the manager who, albeit under pressure, is going to allow its performance, and the other as the audience who will pay – indeed, are paying – to see it.

A Peep Behind the Curtain thus shrewdly capitalizes upon the popularity of burletta at the same time as framing it within a comic plot that encourages the audience to recognize its unworthiness. The comedy as a whole can be seen as promoting this recognition in a way that aims to illustrate the didactic efficacy and thus the superiority of legitimate theatrical forms over such new-fangled appearances as the burletta. Yet just as Garrick himself both promoted legitimate drama and involved himself in the development of supposedly inferior alternative forms, so *A Peep* cannot help but be implicated in the promotion of the form it targets for satirical treatment. Similarly, in *Bon Ton*, the attempt to shore up theatre's credentials as qualitatively different from other contemporary amusements, and thus as a morally beneficial form of entertainment, can only ever be partially successful.

In a note to the first edition, Garrick explained that *Bon Ton, or, High Life Above Stairs* “had been thrown aside for many years” but was brought out finally in March 1775 “with some alterations, for the benefit” of Thomas King. One of Drury Lane's senior actors, he had played Glib in *A Peep Behind the Curtain* and was well-known for his comic roles. Appearing late in the season, the new afterpiece had only eight performances in 1774-5, but was shown eighteen times in 1775-6, and thereafter, McIntyre notes, “it held its place in the repertoire well into the nineteenth

²⁰ The burletta, of course, was a self-consciously absurd genre – Nussbaum quotes Kathryn Shevelow's eloquent description of burlettas as “joke-based, fast-paced, high-spirited, light-hearted, sexually suggestive, highly physical entertainments that delighted their audiences with frenetic foolery, absurd lyrics, and elaborate finales” (Nussbaum, 317n). It is thus not the absurdity of Glib's plotline in itself that drives home the satire in *A Peep*, but the manner of Glib's description of it, and Patent's reactions.

century, on both sides of the Atlantic” (531-32). *Bon Ton*’s subtitle overtly connects the two-act comedy with an earlier afterpiece, James Townley’s *High Life Below Stairs* (1759). Townley was a clergyman and the Advertisement in the printed play explains his motivation to write for the stage as follows: “It was a real Desire to do good, amongst a large and useful body of People, that gave rise to this little Piece. The Author thought the Stage, where the Bad might be disgrac’d, and Good rewarded, the most ready and effectual Method for this Purpose” (2). Given the furore that had followed the success of Church of Scotland minister John Home’s *Douglas* (1757), during which the propriety of a clergyman writing for the stage had become the subject of intense discussion, re-fuelling the anti-theatrical debate, Townley’s modestly-phrased suggestion that the stage rather than the pulpit was the place from which to reach “a large and useful body of People” in order “to do good” is more tendentious than it may at first appear. In the play itself, Lovel, “a young West Indian of Fortune,” discovers with the help of his friend Freeman that his lenience as an employer is encouraging his servants to imitate all the worst excesses of fashionable aristocratic behaviour. When all is revealed and put right at the end, the play concludes with following exchange:

FREEMAN. But what an insufferable Piece of Assurance is it in some of these Fellows to affect and imitate their Masters’ Manners?

LOVEL. What Manners must those be, which they can imitate?

FREEMAN. True.

LOVEL. If Persons of Rank would act up to their Standard, it would be impossible that their Servants could ape them—But when they affect every thing that is ridiculous, it will be in the Power of any low Creature to follow their Example. (2. 54)

Thus while it is the servants who are shown misbehaving and requiring correction, the moral of the play is aimed as much at their superiors, whose responsibility for the misdeeds of those below them in the social scale is underlined, along with the comforting idea of the “impossibility” of the confusion of ranks, if only the upper-classes “would act up to their Standard.”

Bon Ton, as its title suggests, sets the same topic of fashionable aristocratic excess center-stage. Sir John Trotley, staying with his cousin Lady Minikin in town, is horrified by the household’s way of life: Lady Minikin flirts with Colonel Tivy, supposedly suitor to Trotley’s niece Miss Tittup; Tittup, meanwhile, coquettes with Lord Minikin. Late hours, gambling and masquerades are the order of the day, for both the aristocrats and their servants. The play culminates with a scene of farcical confusion in the dark following the return of the principal characters from a masquerade, at the end of which Trotley reveals that the couples have, comically, accidentally ended up with their legitimate partners. Trotley then takes charge, dismissing Tivy for the fortune-hunter he is, banishing Lord Minikin abroad in order to recoup his financial affairs, and taking the two women back to the country with him, “to rescue distressed damsels from those monsters, foreign vices and *Bon Ton*, as they call it” (2. 211). As Gillian Russell has pointed out, the play

attempts to counter the topos of concealment and discovery in masquerade with the topos of discovery in comedy, thereby asserting the moral, aesthetic and institutional superiority of theatre. By revealing the masqueraders to be literally in the dark, and disciplining them through the figure of Sir John

Trotley, Garrick formally distinguishes the theatre and its practices from venues such as the Pantheon and Carlisle House. (200)²¹

There is no doubt that this formal distinction between the theatre and other sites of fashionable amusement is entirely in keeping with Garrick's response to the antitheatrical tendency to lump plays in with such activities as masquerades and gambling as morally pernicious diversions. On the other hand, however much *Bon Ton* in some respects distinguishes theatre as superior, it also demonstrates the extent to which theatre is inextricably entangled in the continuum of amusements offered by the town, in the details of its plot and even in its overall conclusion. As with *A Peep Behind the Curtain*, the dramatic attempt to counter antitheatrical arguments seems to march unavoidably with a reinforcement of them – and indeed to a parodic enactment of such reinforcement, as with Mervin's comment about the influence of plays on young women's behaviour. Both plays exhibit the thin (and not always entirely discernible) line between anti-theatrical discourse and a mocking simulacrum of such discourse.

Bon Ton's self-conscious and humorous engagement with the question of theatre's status amongst the amusements of the town is foregrounded in the Prologue, written by George Colman and spoken by King (who played Sir John):

Bon Ton's a constant Trade

Of rout, *Festino*, Ball and Masquerade!

'Tis plays and puppet-shews; 'tis something new!

'Tis losing thousands ev'ry night at lu!

Nature it thwarts, and contradicts all reason;

'Tis stiff French stays, and fruit when out of season! (n. p.)

²¹ The Pantheon was a public assembly room; it opened in 1772, offering concerts and masquerade balls. Carlisle House was established by Teresa Cornelys in 1760 as a fashionable venue for masquerades, concerts, and balls.

Here, rather than a sliding scale in which legitimate theatre represents the serious, moral face of entertainment far removed from its more vapid or vicious incarnations, we are presented with an almost hysterical juxtaposition of a variety of urban fashions and pleasures, plays lost and undistinguished among balls, puppet-shows and card-playing. In the final four lines of the Prologue, the play's own status as fashionable commodity is further underlined:

To night our *Bayes*, with bold, but careless tints,
Hits off a sketch or two, like Darly's prints.
Should connoisseurs allow his rough draughts strike 'em,
'Twill be *Bon Ton* to see 'em and to like 'em. (n. p.)

Matthew and Mary Darly were successful publishers of satirical prints and caricatures in the 1760s and 1770s; *Bon Ton* the play, like the prints produced by the Darlys, may target for criticism and correction the fashionable aristocratic lifestyle and its parlous effect on all ranks, but the condition of the afterpiece's success, again like the prints, is that it inevitably be subsumed into that very lifestyle as yet another consumable pleasure.

The allure of London's amusements – and the position of the theatre in their midst – is further explored in the play via the character of Davy, Sir John's manservant. Davy is much taken with London – “a fine place, your honour; and I could live here for ever!” (1.1.197) – and when Sir John announces his determination to leave as soon as possible and even tries to keep Davy at home for the evening, he reminds Sir John of his promise “That I should take sixpen'orth of one of the theatres tonight, and a shilling place at the other tomorrow”:

SIR JOHN. Well, well, so I did: is it a moral piece, Davy?

DAVY. Oh yes, and written by a clergyman; it is called the *Rival Canaanites*, or the *Tragedy of Braggadocia*.

SIR JOHN. Be a good lad, and I won't be worse than my word; there's money for you – (*Gives him some.*) but come straight home, for I shall want to go to bed.

DAVY. To be sure, your honour – as I am to go so soon, I'll make a night of it. (*Aside and exit.*) (1.1.198)

Davy's assurance that the play is "written by a clergyman" reminds the audience both of Townley, author of *Bon Ton*'s companion-piece, and of other clergymen-playwrights of the mid-century such as John Home, John Brown and Edward Young, all of whom wrote weighty tragedies; the subtitle of the fictional play, *The Tragedy of Braggadocia*, could be taken as hardly complimentary to their productions, with its implication that such plays may be no more than empty bluster.²² Certainly the possibility that a "moral piece" could have a beneficial effect on audience behaviour is used to comic effect in *Bon Ton*, as Davy returns late and dead drunk from his evening at the theatre, much to Sir John's displeasure: "Did I not order you to come directly from the play, and not be idling and raking about?" (2.1.206). The role of the theatre as the prelude to a night's "merry-making," as Davy calls it – even when offering a "moral" tragedy by a clergyman – confirms the anti-theatrical argument that play-houses *per se* constituted sites of dangerous temptation for the lower classes, distracting them from their duties and encouraging discontent and disruption.²³

²² Given that Garrick staged tragedies by all three clergymen at Drury Lane, it doesn't seem that the joking title can be taken as aiming specifically at any of these writers or their plays, however: there were several plays in the period with similar titles (clergyman Henry Bate's comic opera *The Rival Candidates* had its premier as an afterpiece at Drury Lane earlier in the same season in which *Bon Ton* was first performed, as did Robert Jephson's tragedy *Braganza*), but the title Davy gives appears to mock conventional play-titles more generally rather than a specific instance.

²³ See Barish's discussion of Richardson's *Apprentice's Vade-Mecum* (1734), among other texts: for Richardson, "Plays waste time and money; they tend to be performed during business hours, and so hurt trade; they expose young men to lewd women; and they portray sober men of business as fools and

Yet it could also be argued that, by 1775, such a view was being deliberately parodied by Garrick. Davy's dereliction of duty is satisfyingly predictable and, as Gillian Russell points out, Sir John is both "a force for stability and order" and "partly a figure of fun" (198-9): his complaints about modern London encompass all perceived changes ("I hate innovation – all confusion and no distinction!" [1.1.197]) and include, alongside the shockingly bold behaviour of "painted Jezebels" and the "loose morals" of fashionable ladies, the deplorable demise of the fashion for wigs and the effeminizing luxury of smooth roads:

No rattling and exercise in the hackney-coaches; those who ride in 'em are all fast asleep; and they have strings in their hands, that the coachmen must pull to waken 'em, when they are to be set down – what luxury and abomination!
(1.1.197)

Lord Minikin's manservant Jessamy horrifies Sir John with his nonchalant attitude towards urban immorality – "there's robbing and murder cried every night under my window; but it no more disturbs me than the ticking of my watch at my bed's head" – and prompts him to exclaim, "what a dreadful place this is! But 'tis all owing to the corruption of the times; the great folks game, and the poor folks rob; no wonder that murder ensues; sad, sad, sad!" (2.2.205). The thoroughly hackneyed character of his complaint about "the corruption of the times" – Sir John has already predictably exclaimed "O Tempora, O Mores!" at the end of act 1, scene 1 – renders the moral outrage comically ineffective. Similarly, Sir John's hopeful proposal in his soliloquy at the end of act 1, scene 1 "to draw [Lady Minikin] from the wickedness of this town into the country, where she shall have reading, fowling, and fishing to keep up her

the dupes of the hero, who often specializes in cuckolding citizens" (237). O'Brien comments that Richardson's *Seasonable Examination of the Playhouses* (1735) "attacked the new theaters [such as Giffard's theatre in Goodman's Fields] as a threat to business and 'a very improper Diversion to be placed among the Working Class of People, particularly'" (155).

spirits” (1.3.203) seems comically inadequate (albeit a programme Thomas Gibbons would presumably have approved).

Davy’s post-theatre drunkenness and Sir John’s naïve reliance on the attractions of a quiet country life could be seen, then, as constituting parodies of anti-theatrical discourse. Such parody in some respects sits comfortably beside the enactment of theatre’s moral and aesthetic superiority arguably achieved in the final scene, as Sir John takes charge of the dysfunctional household, dispatching the men from the place and “rescuing” the women. Yet Sir John’s solution to the problem of the women’s dissolute lifestyle is still their removal from (corrupt Frenchified) London – the site of the Theatres Royal – to the (decent English) countryside, far from Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Thus at the close of the play, theatre enacts its own complicity with “London” values, its position as one among many of the capital’s sites of entertainment, as well as its capacity to offer morally superior narratives (and indeed to parody such narratives).

A Peep Behind the Curtain and *Bon Ton* both demonstrate the complexity of Garrick’s response to the anti-theatrical equation of serious theatre with other amusements both within and outside the play-houses, such as pantomimes, masquerades and card-playing. Working with the inbuilt irony of a play articulating anti-theatrical discourse, Garrick concedes the ways in which both he and his medium collude with the very things – whether burlettas or the lifestyle of rich London households – that are also subjected to satirical criticism in the course of his plays. Both as the embodiment of contemporary anxiety about the status of the theatre amongst the proliferating amusements of the day and as a satirical response to that anxiety, *A Peep Behind the Curtain* and *Bon Ton* help to underscore the importance of the *petite pièce* in eighteenth-century debates about theatre’s role and legitimacy.