“Rivals for the Repertory: Theatre and Novel in Georgian London”
BY ROS BALLASTER

Volume 27, Issue 1 (Summer 2012)

Recommended Citation:

Rivals for the Repertory: Theatre and Novel in Georgian London

Ros Ballaster
University of Oxford

Abs: [Acres] is likewise a rival of mine—that is of my other self’s, for he does not think his friend Capt. Absolute ever saw the lady in question;—and it is ridiculous enough to hear him complain to me of one Beverley a concealed skulking rival, who—

Falk: Hush! he’s here. (Sheridan 25)

In this brief exchange in act 2, scene 1 of Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s The Rivals (1775), Jack Absolute reveals the hidden and true rival to his courtship of the novel-besotted Lydia Languish: himself. In a play which pits him against two rivals for Lydia’s affections—Bob Acres and Sir Lucius O’Trigger—it becomes apparent that the only serious contender is his own entirely fictional creation, Ensign Beverley, the dashing impoverished soldier persona he has adopted to win her heart with the promise of adventure and elopement by comparison with dull approved marriage to a worthy young heir promoted by Lydia’s aunt and Jack’s father.

The dangerous influence of the novel leads his wayward beloved to put at risk the union he plans, but Jack counteracts Lydia’s devotion to novelistic plotting by deploying the intrigue techniques of the modern drama; he maintains his part as Beverley to Lydia and his other role as Absolute to his father and her aunt. There are many ways in which a generic rivalry is both conjured and dispelled in this play: the play stages a rivalry

Ros Ballaster is Professor of Eighteenth-Century Studies in the Faculty of English and Professorial Fellow in English at Mansfield College, Oxford University. She has published widely in the field of eighteenth-century literature, in particular in the fields of women’s writing and oriental fiction. Seductive Forms: Women’s Amatory Fiction 1684-1740 (1992) and Fabulous Orients: Fictions of the East in England 1662-1785 (2005) are both published by Oxford University Press.
between theatrical and novelistic narrative and the influence they bear on their respective (and shared) audiences. Quite apart from overt references to the novel in Lydia's preferred reading from the circulating library, Sheridan's play depends upon a series of novel sources for our recognition of character types and plot scenarios. Absolute's over-sensitive friend, Faulkland, lover of Julia, takes his name from a character in a novel by Sheridan's actress mother, Frances, *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761). Mrs. Malaprop's pursuit of an aging Irish soldier who in fact only has eyes for her niece is borrowed from Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker* (1771), in which the linguistically-challenged spinster aunt, Tabitha Bramble, pursues the much-travelled Scottish officer Captain Lismahago.

A chimeric rivalry generates a comic plot to keep the audience amused through a five act entertainment. There can be no doubt that the plots and characters of the early modern theatre provided important sources and helped to shape the character of an emergent form, the novel. The earliest shapers of the novel—with the not insignificant exception of Daniel Defoe—often had or maintained careers in the theatre, as actors, playwrights, and/or managers: William Congreve, Haywood, and Henry Fielding are only the best known names to which we might add some less familiar but equally interesting ones, such as Richard Cumberland, Elizabeth Inchbald, and Elizabeth Griffith. So too, the thriving metropolitan theatre of the eighteenth century recognised a significant rival in the popularity of the novel, especially its most sentimental manifestations, and sought to turn that rivalry into a new form of attraction and a market advantage—as theatrical cultures and successful protagonists in the comic theatrical plot so often do.

Let us acknowledge, though, that this is not a rivalry of two equal and opposite generic forces. Attention to the terms of Lucius' concession might lead us to conclude that the novel might be seen as no rival at all. As late as the 1770s, plays could announce themselves as “novels.” In 1773, Oliver Goldsmith's play better known as *She Stoops to Conquer* was submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's office for a performance license with the title “The Novel; or, the Mistakes of the Night” (although it was performed and printed with a new title and the same sub-title). Within the same play, the term “novel” is used to refer to printed fiction in similar terms to those found in its near contemporary, Sheridan's *The Rivals*. For instance, in the first scene, Constance Neville asks Kate Hardcastle, who is disturbed by her father's peremptory command that she should consider the anticipated visitor, Marlowe, as a prospective husband, “Has your brother or the cat been meddling? Or has the last novel been too
moving?”, and in act 5, when Constance returns from a contemplated elopement attempt with her lover to throw herself on her hard-hearted aunt’s mercy, Mrs. Hardcastle’s response is “Pshaw, pshaw, this is all but the whining end of a modern novel” (Goldsmith and Friedman 5: 87-220, 114, 215).

The coherence of the action of a single play (the action of Goldsmith’s She Stoops, for instance, takes place over one night) might lead us to question whether the experience of attending a play was in any way similar to that of reading a novel. It is worth reminding ourselves, however, that the experience of theatregoing in Georgian England (and especially Georgian London) was not that of watching a single play derived from a single play text. An evening commenced at six in the evening and ran for four to five hours involving (at least) a mainpiece and an afterpiece, usually some form of dance or song, and often also an interlude. Latecomers could enter for half price after the third act of the mainpiece. The experience was one of seriality, the interaction of narratives and performances from different genres and often mixtures of genres (opera, burletta, tragedy, comedy, and farce), of different lengths. Perhaps the piecemeal and uneven nature of the early novel with its less-than-carefully-paced unfolding of plot looks less unwieldy and generically awkward if we measure it against the expectations of a theatre-going public.

A Novel Evening at the Theatre: 1 August 1789

The London Theatre Royal at the Haymarket offered an evening of unusual thematic coherence on Saturday 1 August 1789. The performances at the Haymarket that summer took place in a period of turmoil both for the country and this theatre. The French National Assembly was formed on 17 June and the Bastille was stormed by French Revolutionary forces on 14 July. The debt-ridden manager of the Haymarket theatre, George Colman the Elder, suffered a fit on 18 June which left him mentally deranged. He had made a new will in April leaving the theatre and his literary property to his son, George Colman the Younger. A program was offered on the evening of Saturday 1 August of three plays, all comic, and a dance performance: each item called attention to the attractions and risks of performing to a fictional script other than a play script. I consider each in turn before turning to consider the rival claims to mimetic success of the drama and the novel: claims to deliver plausible representation and prompt virtuous imitation in an audience.

Half an Hour after Supper: A New Novel (1789), an anonymous one act play, first performed as an afterpiece in May of the same year at the Haymarket, was—according to the preface of the published work—written by a
woman who enjoyed the patronage of the theatre manager.1 The short (half hour) piece portrays contrasting sisters, the vivacious Sukey and the sentimental Eliza, in the half hour after supper, who—keen to imitate the heroines they admire in modern fiction and aided by a resourceful nurse—plan to elope with their suitors, Captain Berry and aristocrat George Bentley. Their novel-obsessed aunt, another Tabitha, discovers the suitors hidden beneath the table when she returns to the parlor to retrieve a volume of her favorite novel and is fooled into believing that Bentley has been admitted to the house in order to court her. She leaves to enter the waiting carriage but before the girls can escape also, their father, upright merchant Mr. Sturdy, enters. When Sturdy expresses a willingness to consider the matches, Berry leaves not prepared to engage in anything but an elopement but Bentley confesses himself the ordinary son of a businessman and the play concludes with the likely promise of his employment with Sturdy and the eventual union with his beloved Eliza, as well as the discovery that Tabitha has willingly departed in the postilion with Berry. A note prefixed to the printed version of the play finds the authoress express a hope that her own script will come to rival the novels in the closets of her female readers:

The favourable reception with which this little sketch has been honoured by a generous publick, demands the most grateful acknowledgements of its authoress; who now commits it to the press, in the hope it may not offend, or lose its value, in the closets of her fair countrywomen. (Half an Hour after Supper n.p.)

The Monthly Review (no. 89 by Ralph Griffith) echoes the reference to the closet, interestingly hinting that the piece likely worked better as a stage play than as a substitute for novel reading in a closet: “We hope, for the sake of the moral, that, on the stage, it possessed some little interest; of which, we are sorry to say, it is totally deficient in the closet” (Griffith). Indeed, the novel-reading Half an Hour portrays is largely performative and sociable; Tab reads to the family interrupted by her impatient brother who is no martinet and refuses to lead his family by force and prohibition;

1. “This trifle is dedicated to GEORGE COLMAN, Esq. […] may this small tribute add one more pledge of honour to a character revered and honoured by all; more especially the gentle and the fearful, led on by his delicate and kind encouragements: of which no one can be more highly sensible than she, who, with respect and esteem, now subscribes herself, His most grateful, most obliged, and most obedient humble servant, THE AUTHORESS. London, June 1789.” Half an Hour after Supper: An Interlude, in One Act, as Performed at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, 2nd ed. (London: printed for J. Debrett, 1789) n.p.
the servant Frank who reads snatches of the novels discarded in the family parlor complains that they are covered in grease and ink from the hands of previous borrowers from the circulating library. Novels are not handsome and pristine volumes enjoyed in solitary communion but grubby, much passed around, shared sources of collective pleasure for women and servants and the “moral” of the drama suggests that the novel’s power is dissipated in this diffusion. It is Tab, we note, who returns alone to retrieve her volume of the novel and it is Tab, the spinster aunt, who is conveniently taken off the family’s hands at the close of the play. Novels appear to have resolved rather than broken a family crisis by precipitating action.

On 1 August 1789, *Half an Hour after Supper* was the mainpiece, followed by a three act comedy by the actress, playwright, and later novelist (her first novel, *A Simple Story*, appeared in 1791), Elizabeth Inchbald. Inchbald was an associate of Mary Wollstonecraft, a Roman Catholic and a committed Jacobin: an independent soul who had skillfully evaded the kind of patronage from Colman that the female author of *Half an Hour* had acknowledged publically and with such gratitude (see Donkin 110-31).² Inchbald’s *The Married Man* is a reworking of a 1727 play by Philippe Néricault Destouches, *Le Philosophe Marié*. The French verse couplet original apparently reflected the real life situation of the author: that of being secretly married to a deserving wife but unwilling to acknowledge a union at odds with a reputation for rational, sceptical, and distanced philosophizing (Inchbald and Destouches). The hero in both Destouches’ and Inchbald’s versions is more than a tiresome and hypocritical pedant, however. Plot convolutions involving the courtship of his gentle wife’s lively sister by a friend who has disguised his personal wealth, and the pursuit of the wife by a foppish self-regarding acquaintance, as well as his uncle-guardian’s determination to engineer a financially advantageous marriage for his nephew, result in the hero coming to a new self-awareness and declaring not only his marriage but his passionate attachment to a worthy object. *The Married Man* provides an interesting reversal of the scenario of *Half an Hour*; here, it is a man’s attachment to a “paper” model by which he lives his life (the “philosopher hero” rather than the “novel heroine”) that must be undone through the twists of a plot which bring him to sense and perspective.

No such perspective or illumination comes to the heroine of the third play presented at the Haymarket on 1 August 1789. The eponymous hero-

---
² In chapter 5, “Advantage, Mrs Inchbald,” Donkin explains that Inchbald was retained as an actress at the Haymarket but her final performance was as Irene in her own play, *The Mogul Tale*, in the summer of 1789. Donkin charts how Inchbald played Colman the Elder off against his rival Thomas Harris at Covent Garden, alternating the offering of her plays to both managers.
ine of George Colman the Elder’s well-established one act farce first performed at Drury Lane 5 December 1760, Polly Honeycomb, refuses to give up on her “novel” suitor, Scribble, even after he is revealed (like Bentley) not to be the honourable suitor he claims but a simple attorney’s clerk. The farce is left unresolved with Mr. Honeycomb’s preferred suitor, the pompous Mr. Ledger, retiring from his courtship, Polly’s co-conspiratorial nurse exposed as the aunt of Scribble seeking to promote his interest, Scribble threatening to sue Honeycomb claiming that his union with Polly complies with the strictures of the 1753 marriage act, and the only possible resolution in the unlikely hands of Polly’s so far ineffectual and alcohol-dependent mother who advises her husband: “You are too violent—Go, my dear, go and compose yourself, and I’ll set all matters to rights” (Brewer 108-09).

While Polly and Scribble are evident antecedents of Lydia and Beverly/Absolute, Polly is an unusual heroine, with no trace of her successor’s sentimentality. It is the adventure of the novel, indeed its down-to-earthness that attracts this young woman. The prologue delivered by Mr. King, the actor who played Scribble, makes visible the transition from the familiar satire of the smitten romance reader (a tradition to which we will return later in this article) to that of the more lively novel addict. Novel we are told is “The younger Sister of ROMANCE”:

Less solemn is her air, her drift the same,
And NOVEL her enchanting, charming, Name.
ROMANCE might strike our grave Forefathers’ pomp,
But NOVEL for our Buck and lively Romp! (Brewer 68)

Instead of the bulky folios of romance we have “Two Neat Pocket Volumes,” sentimental in style and full of incident in each chapter. This Polly is a “pocket” version of the romance reader, just as the one act afterpiece is a miniaturised or pocket version of the three act comedy that precedes its performance. The preface to Polly Honeycomb provides an account of the reservations of the author’s mother about the play. She complains that the play fails to conform to the rules of comic drama: indeed that this satire upon the novel is too novelistic:

3. Under Lord Hardwicke’s Marriage Act designed to prevent clandestine marriages, for a marriage to be valid it had to be performed in a church and after the publication of banns or the obtaining of a licence. Those under the age of 21 had to have parental consent if they married by licence; marriages by banns, by contrast, were valid as long as the parent of the minor did not actually forbid the banns.
She is astonished at my attempting to violate the received laws of the Drama—that the *Catastrophe* (that was really her word) is directly contrary to all known rules—that the several Characters, instead of being dismissed, one by one, should have been industriously kept together, to make a bow to the audience at the dropping of the curtain. (Brewer 60)

Novel and theatre are not it seems only rivals for the same audience but also rivals for the laurels of “realism” and “probability.” While the play itself argues that novel-reading leads women to delusive visions of the reality of courtship and marriage, the preface here suggests that dramatic conventions lead to improbable unions and unlikely closure which an allusion to the less predictable outcomes found in a “new” form of narrative make visible.

However, with all its unevenness and irresolution of conclusion, *Polly Honeycomb* was not the last performance of the evening of 1 August 1780. It concluded rather with an even further diminished tribute to the novel: a dance performance titled, “Prière après Souper” composed by James Byrne and performed by Byrne, Miss De Camp, and the two Miss Simonets. Byrne (1756-1845) was the official ballet master at Covent Garden and provided entertainments for the Haymarket in the period of summer closure of the major theatre. The title of this dance alerts us to the fact that the dance was derived from a novelistic source: Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* (1768). In chapter 68, the sentimental traveller in France, the clergyman Yorick, enjoys a lentil soup with a peasant family and is profoundly moved by a lovely post prandial dance performed by the young sons and their wives before his elderly hosts, which he is told constitutes their means of saying their grace after supper. The fact that the dance involved only four performers and only one man makes this scene a less likely source however than the two chapters that followed which also involved supper and prayers. These chapters in *A Sentimental Journey* deliver a more salacious story in which Yorick finds himself in the difficult position of having to share a small chamber with two beds in it with a French lady and her maid. After supper, Yorick and the French lady negotiate that her maid will sleep in the drafty antechamber and they will occupy the beds; they draw up a treaty determining what clothes he should wear, and agree that he will not speak after they have retired to bed except to say his prayers (possibly the “prayers after supper” referenced in the title of the dance). At one in the morning and unable to sleep, Yorick ejaculates, “Oh my God” prompting a heated argument with his roommate who claims he has broken their treaty while he insists that his cry conforms to the third article (prayers are the
only form of speech he is allowed once they have retired). Eventually, he falls asleep. The next morning he reaches his arm across to the neighbouring bed in a conciliatory gesture, only to find the fille de chambre/her maid squeezed between the two beds and that he has touched an (unnamed) part of the maid’s anatomy. That the dance required one man and three women makes this performance (Yorick, the fille de chambre, her mistress, and a maid or other person providing the supper) a more likely—and more appropriate—source for Byrne’s choreography.

If this was indeed the scene from *A Sentimental Journey* represented in the playhouse, we can see a strong relation to the other performances of the night: men and women at cross purposes and an ironic but affectionate treatment of sentimentality. But perhaps most importantly, these performances anticipate their own reception by relying on an audience recognizing allusion to another “rival” system of representation. Sterne’s fiction was especially admired for its representation of the physical body and its reading of the expressiveness of gesture, by contrast with the arbitrariness and variability of spoken and written language, however well-intentioned (Smitten). Interpretation through dance could express this theatrical aspect of Sterne’s curious style.

**Rivals for Mimesis: Theatrical Treatments of the Novel**

*Half an Hour* and *Polly Honeycomb* provide new variants on a familiar theme: the danger of imitative reading, especially for women. The remainder of this paper will consider the “rival” claims of play and novel to exercise a power to prompt imitation in a newly literate and theatre-going audience, especially in the metropolis of London, where the two genres flourished side by side. The proliferation of theories of acting and of criticism of theatre relates productively to the lively and on-going conversation about the “novel” as a tool for incendiary or affective or sociable response. In this paper, however, I explore a different “mirror” effect: plays about the power of prose fiction to prompt imitative behavior in female readers mirror novels about the power of dramatic performance to prompt imitative behavior in a female audience, and vice versa.

In England, the theatrical representation of a female mind swayed by fictional representation (early recognised as the female equivalent of Cervantes’ Don Quixote) most familiar to the eighteenth century was Richard Steele’s successful play, *The Tender Husband* (1705). Steele’s play concerns the fooling of two errant women, one a married woman obsessed with French fashions whose husband Clerimont senior engages his friend Fainlove in a plot to court her in order to correct her folly and the other a merchant’s niece obsessed with romances and unhappy at the union ar-
ranged for her with a country clodhopper who is persuaded into a clandestine marriage by a needy aristocrat passing himself off as a romance suitor, Clerimont Junior (Steele and Tonson). Steele’s play was first titled, “The City Nymph; or, the Accomplish’d Fools,” suggesting the emphasis was on the plot line of Biddy Tipkin, the bourgeois romance fantasist, rather than that of the husband’s “tender” chastisement of a fashionable wife. The play was performed at Drury Lane on 23 April 1705 with a new title but the same subtitle. Two plays of the mid eighteenth century continue with the plot of the misguided romance heroine fooled into marriage, but there is a significant new relationship announced in a familiar narrative at this point: with the published novel and its claims to act as an antidote to the romance. A two act comedy titled, Angelica; or Quixote in Petticoats was printed for the author in 1758 with a dedicatory preface to David Garrick which explains that the Drury Lane actor-manager had turned the play down for performance because of its similarity to Steele’s Tender Husband. The phenomenon of the published play text which has seen no performance suggests another form of “mirroring”: that the play might be consumed under similar circumstances to the novel, indeed that it might serve as a surrogate for the novel.

The advertisement by the anonymous author asserts that the character of Angelica and “the heroic part of Careless, is not only borrow’d, but entirely taken, from the female Quixote, of the ingenious Mrs Lennox” (Angelica; or Quixote in Petticoats. A Comedy, in Two Acts). In Lennox’s 1752 novel The Female Quixote: or, the Adventures of Angelica, the heroine is persuaded to abandon her delusion that romance narratives are a true representation of life by transferring her attachment to the novel, presented to her as a more rational and credible mimetic performance than the works she came to admire and model her own life upon from her dead mother’s library. A 1777 play by the actor Robert Hitchcock titled, The Coquette; or, the Mistakes of the Heart, performed at the theatres of Hull, the Haymarket, and York (Hitchcock), also took its source or at least acknowledged its source not from another play (or play tradition) but from a novel, a near contemporary to the Female Quixote and equally concerned to bring down a peg or two a heroine over-persuaded by the theory rather than practice of romance courtship: in this case Haywood’s History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless (1751).

Neither play, however, bears a close relation to its acknowledged source; indeed, both pursue plot lines familiar from the drama rather than the novel. Unlike Lennox’s Arabella, Angelica has a sister, Melinda, pursued by her suitor’s friend, Modeley. Where Arabella has a simple and trusting maid, Angelica’s maid is a familiar figure from the comedy of intrigue: feisty and scheming, if equally ignorant of romance conventions, Maria makes a good profit by accepting bribes from her mistress’s suitors and eventually wins herself a husband in the wily servant of her mistress’s suitor, George. Unlike Lennox’s Angelica, the play’s heroine does not convince all who meet her of her sense and understanding and is—like Biddy Tipkin—inclined only to an antique style of speech, a tendency to call all her suitors “presumptuous,” and an inconvenient commitment to the romance tradition’s expectation of many years of chaste courtship prior to marriage.

The Coquette finds itself even more distantly related to its source, borrowing only some plot motifs and a few characters from its source. The popular comical character of an elderly sea captain named Hysom who courts Betsy only in sailing metaphors is reprised in the figure of Captain Helm, suitor to Flora Younglove (who shares her first name and the burden of a lustful widowed mother with the character of Flora Mellasin, Betsy’s cousin and rival in Haywood’s novel). Frederick Fineer is reprised in the role of the dressmaker’s, Mrs. Fashion’s, son, who passes himself off as the enamoured aristocrat Lord Flamwell in an effort to trick the play’s heroine (renamed Miss Bloomer) into marriage. However, Betsy’s unhappy marriage to Mr. Munden and her reconciliation with her first suitor, Mr. Trueworth, only after he has himself loved and lost a first wife, finds no place in this conventional if rather rambling comedy.

Neither Betsy nor her theatrical counterpart, Miss Bloomer, is a novel reader. Both are young women of fashion over-persuaded of their sway in the world by the deference that their suitors pay them before marriage. It is noteworthy that the long history of representing the female Quixote figure in the drama often draws parallels, indeed suggests some uncanny mirroring, of the woman of fashion and the romance reader despite the former’s addiction to the novel and the latter’s addiction to the antique. However, the transition from the figure of the female romance to the female novel reader (or in the case of Miss Bloomer in The Coquette to the “modern miss”) is not a smooth one and demonstrates the active rivalry between two modern forms, the revived Georgian theatre and the mid-century domestic novel. The novel heroine is impatient and busy, sexually and socially aware by comparison with her idealising, often platonic, forbearer. She will not wait or expect a ten year courtship from her lover. She runs the
risk of seeming fast or debauched, but can also represent a modernizing force who educates an indulgent father-figure (Sturdy and Absolute, if not Honeycomb) in the new sociable forms of authority of the mid-eighteenth century.

Georgian audiences were conscious of the irony that actresses known for sexual dalliance and for their financial shrewdness were playing the parts of innocent heroines at risk (Nussbaum). The theatres themselves were understood to be places of risk and exposure for women. By contrast the danger of the novel was most often articulated in terms of the risk attending not being on public view; intimate relations with the written text could take part in a private boudoir without the surveillance of other family members. The assumed tendency among women to mimic popular narrative representations, whether encountered on the public stage or in the private boudoir, is a vehicle for early formulations of audience response. Novelists who paid attention to the experience of women at the theatre experiment with solutions to the capacity of the theatre to prompt imitation, solutions that also restage a ubiquitous rivalry between novelistic and theatrical narrative.

**Rivals for Mimesis: Novelistic Treatments of the Theatre**

Richard Steele’s long-estranged friend, Delarivier Manley, who began her public career as a writer with two stage plays in 1696 (*The Lost Lover* at Drury Lane and *The Royal Mischief* at Lincoln’s Inn Fields) provided an account of the danger that the affective power of theatre might prompt imitation in its female audience in her influential scandal novel, *Secret Memoirs and Manners ... From the New Atalantis* (1709). At the end of the first volume, readers encounter the story of Louisa, who is persuaded by her corrupt guardian, Hernando Volpone, in his campaign to seduce her of the moral imperatives of bigamy. In her depiction of Louisa’s response to an opera fortuitously concerned with a woman’s guiltless bigamy, Manley focalises through the lascivious Volpone:

Louisa, who did not see such Representations, became extremely mov’d at this: Her young Breasts heav’d with Sorrow; the Tears fill’d her Eyes, and she betray’d her Sense of their Misfortune with a Tenderness that Hernando did not think had been in her; he was infinitly pleas’d, and employ’d a world of pains to applaud, instead of ridiculing, as his Lady did, that sensibility of Soul; when they came away, he took care that her Hand should fall to his share: As they were going home, he sat over against her, in the same manner as before. At Supper, the Play was their Subject: His Wife was reason-
ing about the Accident of the double Marriage, and said it was necessary the Poet should dispatch her out of the way, for loaded with such a Misfortune, ’twas impossible she should live without being infamous, and consequently detesting her self. Hernando was not of the same Opinion, and upon that Head, in his eloquent manner, introduc’d a learned Discourse of the lawfullness of double Marriages … (Manley 2: 132)  

The “opera” Louisa attends is most likely a roman à clef reference to Thomas Southerne’s *The Fatal Marriage* (1694), based on Aphra Behn’s novella, *The History of the Nun; or, the Fair Vow-Breaker* (published posthumously in 1688). If so, for the reader in the know, Hernando’s eventual success in persuading Louisa to espouse bigamy as a conscious and (for her) moral choice, is especially remarkable: both play and novel concern a woman who is an unwitting bigamist, persuaded into marrying a second suitor after she has been convinced of the death of her first husband on the battlefield. 

The incommensurability between the dramatic content and the actual circumstances of Louisa’s seduction is, I would suggest, not an oversight on Manley’s part. Rather, the “anti-theatricality” of the story lies in the argument that the affective power of the performance and play prompts an imitative response in a female audience member that makes her vulnerable to seduction. Hernando’s arguments are many and carefully outlined but only serve to remind the reflective reader (as opposed to the merely “reflecting” or “mirroring” female theatregoer) that the case for more than one spouse is designed to advantage a predatory male, rather than providing the heroine with an opportunity for tragic authority and sway. It may be worth noting that the preface to Southerne’s published play acknowledges that it was written for a famous tragic actress, Elizabeth Barry: it is she, Southerne claims in his preface, who “has breath’d a Soul into it, that may keep it alive” (Southerne n.p.). 

If Manley warns that the experience of the theatre may stimulate a desire to emulate the affective force of the tragic actress in women, other writers warn that there are other behaviors and pleasures that women may imitate in the theatre not portrayed on stage. More common, perhaps, in the novel is the representation of the loose and sexualized environs of the pit as a dangerous lure to women. In Haywood’s *History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (1751), it is Betsy’s thoughtless behavior at the theatre which

---

5. The separately published key indicates that the scandal to which Manley is referring concerned William Cowper, first Earl Cowper, Whig MP for Hertford Castle and rumours that he seduced Miss Elizabeth Culling or Cullen of Hertingfordbury Park, Hertfordshire, while married to Judith Cowper, née Booth.
further estranges her suitor, Mr. Trueworth (chapter 9, volume 2). He arrives at her house to find Betsy dressed to go to the theatre with her disreputable friend, Miss Forward. She intends to attend the first night of a tragedy at Lincolns-Inn-Fields, despite his warning that she should not be seen “with a woman of her fame, in a place as public as the playhouse” (Haywood 231). She receives a letter from Miss Forward confirming a box is procured and sets off with the internal conviction of being prudent given the reservations of a man she trusts. On arrival, their lateness means the box is lost and they must content themselves with the third row in the pit and all too soon Betsy forgets her serious intentions:

—the brilliant audience,—the musick,—the moving scenes exhibited on the stage, and above all the gallantries, with which herself and Miss Forward were treated, by several gay young gentlemen, who, between the acts, presented them with fruits and sweet-meats, soon dissipated all those reflections, which it was so much her interest to have cherished, and she once more relapsed into her former self. (Haywood 235-36)

Two rakes invite the ladies to dine at a tavern to which Miss Forward agrees; however, when one of the rakes makes advances and realizes Betsy’s innocence he takes pity on her and conducts her honorably home. This story is retold from Trueworth’s rather than Betsy’s perspective two chapters later (chapter eleven) and we learn that he also attended the theatre in a black periwig and muffled in a cloak, placing himself in “a part of the middle gallery, which had the full command of more than half the boxes” (246). He has to move to another post in the theatre in order to spot the two ladies and watches the sly nods and winks among the regular pit members at the behavior of Betsy. At the end of the play he stands at the door and sees her leave with two men he knows are utter strangers to her in a hackney coach.

This incident leads him to reason he must give her up despite his continuing love. Trueworth embarks on an affair with Flora Mellasin, the besotted and lustful stepdaughter of Betsy’s guardian. The bonds of his affection for Betsy now loosened, he forms a new and honourable attachment to Harriot Loveit, the sister of his friend, Sir Bazil. Harriot is an aristocratic countrywoman who dislikes London, finds court dull and masquerades too inclusive. Nonetheless, she admires plays and opera and considers they can be improving. When absent from London, she finds means to “enjoy in theory all the satisfaction the representation could afford” (317), through private performance:
“This is somewhat extraordinary, indeed madam,” cried Mr Trueworth; “be so good as to let us know by what method.” “It is this, sir,” answered she; —“as for the plays, I have a very good collection of old ones by me, and have all the new ones sent down to me when they come out;—when I was last in London, I was several times at the theatre,—I observed how the actors and actresses varied their voices and gestures, according to the different characters they appeared in on the stage;—and thus, whilst I am reading my play, am enabled to judge pretty near how it shews in representation.—I have, indeed, somewhat more difficulty in bringing the opera home to me, yet I am so happy as to be able to procure a shadow of it at least;—we have two or three gentlemen in the neighbourhood, who play to great perfection on the violin, and several ladies, who have very pretty voices, and some skill in music;—my sister touches the bass viol finely, and I play a little on the harpsichord;—we have all our parts in score before us, which we execute to the best of our power:—it serves, however, to divert ourselves, and those friends who think it worth their while to come and hear us.”

Mr Trueworth cried out, in a kind of rapture, as soon as she had done speaking.—“Who would not think himself happy to be one of the audience at such a performance?” (317-18)

Haywood effectively translates the space of the theatre with the risks that have been so evident in Betsy’s experience to that of the domestic home. Harriot is secure in the company of a virtuous married sister when she attends the theatre in London but is also able to engage in a reflective imitative relation to metropolitan theatrical performance in the security of her own home with gentlemen and ladies she knows. It comes as no surprise that Trueworth makes her his bride, although Haywood finally engineers a conclusion that allows a chastened Betsy (after a failed marriage) and grieving Trueworth (on the death of his virtuous bride) to be united. The novel then does not refute or refuse the theatre’s capacity to stimulate affective response but it contains or reframes it within the form of the book and presents the space of the home and its known quantities of family and locality as the most appropriate space for women to imitate and experience again those responses.

The translation and repetition of the experience of metropolitan theatre into domestic and novelistic contexts can be found as early as the second part of Samuel Richardson’s Pamela (1741) voiced by the heroine most often associated with the newness of the novel and most inclined to refute her own association with the kind of bourgeois aspiration to
romancing displayed by Steele’s Biddy Tipkin. So it may be no surprise to find that a performance of Steele’s *Tender Husband* is one of the first productions about which she writes to her new sister-in-law Lady Davers when she visits the London theatres with her new husband in the second part or sequel Richardson published in December 1741. Pamela takes a position of orthodoxy on the London stage; recent criticism has noted that the 1737 Licensing Act might be seen less as a repressive act of Walpole’s administration weary of incendiary political satire than a response to a felt popular demand for regulation and control of stage content (Kin-servik). Pamela pontificates after her several first visits to the playhouse that:

I think the stage, by proper regulation, may be a profitable amusement.—But nothing more convinces one of the truth of the common observation, that the best things, corrupted, prove the worst, than these representations. The terror and compunction from evil deeds, the compassion for a just distress, and the general beneficence which those lively exhibitions are so capable of raising in the human mind, might be of great service, when directed to right ends, and induced by proper motives. (Richardson and Kinkead-Weekes 2: 252 [Letter LIII])

The stage’s capacity to stimulate feeling in its audience is, however, too often given to the representation of raging love. Diana Solomon has written intelligently about Pamela’s response to the first play she discusses, a production of Ambrose Philips’ *The Distressed Mother* (first produced and printed in 1712, an adaptation of Racine’s *Andromaque*) (Solomon); Pamela takes particular exception to the prologue written for Anne Oldfield in which the sprightly actress guys ironically to imply that the heroine’s decision to marry again after the death of a much loved husband and to her husband’s enemy in order to protect her son was made in bad faith and is in fact an act of sexual opportunism to obtain sexual satisfaction with a new husband. Pamela explains in her own distress that:

An Epilogue spoken by Mrs. Oldfield in the Character of Andromache, … was more shocking to me, than the most terrible Parts of the Play; as by lewd, and even senseless Double Entendre, it could be calculated only to efface all the tender, all the virtuous Sentiments, which the Tragedy was design’d to raise. (Richardson and Kinkead-Weekes 2: 252 [Letter LIII])
Pamela’s circumstances to some extent mirror that of the tragic heroine she discusses and she runs the very real risk of being seen as a consummate actress rather than a virtuous innocent. The second part of Pamela might be seen as a form of epilogue to the first part, an epilogue in which a sexually knowing married woman nods to a reader who suspects that she was less than innocent in her earlier attempts to flee a sexual aggressor. Pamela seeks to put some distance between herself and this reading in her critique of Oldfield’s epilogue. Here, as elsewhere, Pamela associates the breaking of plausibility and consistency in character (the “realism” of narrative performance) with a failure to sustain a moral purpose: arguably the ethical and aesthetic project of her own eponymous construction. Pamela embodies the novel.

If Pamela might be seen as an accomplished actress, her husband might well be characterised as an accomplished fool. And Pamela’s next letter turns from her responses to tragedy to a discussion of a comedy, a performance of Richard Steele’s The Tender Husband; or, the Accomplished Fool. She is equally dissatisfied with a play she had anticipated enjoying because it was penned by the much admired author of The Spectator:

There seemed to me to be much wit and satire in the play: but, upon my word, I was grievously disappointed as to the morality of it; nor, in some places, is probability preserved; and there are divers speeches so very free, that I could not have expected to meet with such, from the names I mentioned. (2: 255, Letter LIV)

She takes particular exception to a scene in which Clerimont Junior is introduced to Biddy as a painter preparing her picture for her wedding. Biddy wants to be portrayed as a romance heroine with a white palfrey drawn by a dwarf: Clerimont tells her a “story” of a noble lover who disguises himself as a painter to gain access to the woman he adores. Richardson’s heroine is the namesake of a princess in Sir Philip Sidney’s sixteenth-century romance of Arcadia, but the hugely successful first part of the novel took pains to insist that this Pamela is no princess in disguise as a country innocent and that her idiolect is that of simple piety not the romancing Mr. B persistently charges her with.

Pamela is the bearer of the values of novelization, turning theatrical elements and information into narrative prose distanced from the space and place of the theatre itself. It is significant that Pamela produces two “books” in the course of this sequel: a series of letters for Mr. B which respond to John Locke’s Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1692) and a series of letters for Lady Davers which respond to the plays she has seen.
The twin “sources” for the novel are here the object of Pamela's private reflection: empirical philosophy and theatrical culture. And she turns them into “sub-plots” as well as material objects (bound papers collecting her thoughts to the moment) within the novel of her life, itself a collection of letters. Richardson's production of a sequel in itself also manifests a feature of Richardson's “new” form of fiction: its apparent lack of an ending. Here, we return to the debate opened in the preface to Polly Honeycomb: that the absolute distinction between narrative in the drama and narrative in the novel is that the former closes (however artificially) whereas the latter only closes artificially and always extends the possibility of further narration (Pamela spawns imitations, Pamela continues to “write” beyond the end of the novel[s] which bear her name).  

Closure and ending were intimately related to issues of morality, influence, and imitation as well as genre in the eighteenth century, couched in terms of a debate on the theatre about “poetic justice,” especially in the tragedy. It is worth noting that the generic distinction between comedy and tragedy only hinges on their different endings. The gauntlet in the debate about poetic justice was thrown down by Joseph Addison in 1711 in Spectator no. 40 (Monday, 16 April) (Addison and Steele 4: 503). Addison denounces poetic justice as implausible and false because in life virtue is not always rewarded or vindicated. John Dennis in a “Letter to the Spectator” (1711) responded with the argument that tragedy must emphasize the rewards of virtue and ensure that evildoers are punished during the performance. Richardson explicitly evoked this debate in his postscript to Clarissa (1748-49), his own rewriting of the “comic” Pamela as tragedy (Postscript, Richardson and Ross 1495). Richardson is responding to those readers who wrote requesting a happy ending to his novel and he deploys Addison to defend his decision not to comply. That Richardson's female readers and correspondents were very alert to the issue of poetic justice is apparent in an intriguing comment on Betsy Thoughtless' plot twist which restores Betsy to her truly worthy suitor after his marriage to a more virtuous reader. Thus, Anne Donnellan wrote to Samuel Richardson on 11 February 1752: “Who the author of Betsy Thoughtless is, I don't know, but his [sic] poetic justice I think very bad: he kills a good woman to make way for one of the worst, in my opinion, I ever read of” (Richardson et al. 4: 56).  

Conclusion, Catastrophe and the Arts of Anticipation

Inconclusive conclusion, catastrophe which owes more to the realities of life (in which justice if distributed at all is distributed unevenly) than to the rules of stage decorum: novelists concerned with the stage and dramatists referencing the novel hinge their arguments on endings. However, the debate over endings may mask a more complex relationship in which different forms anticipate each other’s reception and seek to gain a strategic advantage. This article has demonstrated the ever deepening entanglement of stage and novel through the eighteenth century. We are left questioning the apparent terms and seriousness of this engagement. Is this a staged rivalry which mutually advances the interests of both genres? The history of the duopoly of the licensed stage (Drury Lane and Covent Garden) after the 1737 Act certainly suggests that those who worked in the theatre were aware that rivalry could be mutually beneficial to both parties. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “anticipation”: “To take off or deal with (a thing), or perform (an action) before another person or agent has had time to act, so as to gain an advantage.” By anticipating their own reception through the filter of a proximate and rival genre, both stage and novel claimed advantage in a crowded market. However, this claim to difference and antagonism has obscured to subsequent critics their profound interimplication—at all levels of authorship, plot, character, and reception—which were exploited for mutual advantage.

Works Cited
Colman, George. Polly Honeycomb. 1760. Print.  


