

“WE MURDER POETS FOR YOU ON OUR STAGE”. LEE’S  
AND GARRICK’S ADAPTATIONS OF *THE COUNTRY*  
*WIFE* FOR EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY AUDIENCES<sup>1</sup>

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The prologue to Garrick’s version of Wycherley’s *The Country Wife*, spoken by Mr. Hart in the role of Moody (Pinchwife) gives a fair picture of the main reason why plays were so often revised and updated during the eighteenth century, a phenomenon that would go unrivalled at any other period in the history of British Drama. The reason for it lies mainly in the long lasting theatrical monopoly, that favoured the repeated staging of stock plays whose dramatic appeal was beyond doubt, and which, moreover, avoided the costs involved in the performance of a new play, whose success was uncertain. Theatre managers therefore tended to be rather conservative and only accepted scripts of new plays that were very likely to prove successful. The rate of new plays was, consequently, scarce as compared with that of other periods, whereas the number of revised versions of classical plays kept a steady presence on stage<sup>2</sup>. Although the term “classical” could only be applied to widely acknowledged playwrights of the past, mainly Shakespeare and some of his contemporaries, it would soon include some successful Restoration playwrights, such as W. Wycherley, author of the most emblematic comedy of wit: *The Country Wife*.

Even though critics have widely differed as to the meaning of this play<sup>3</sup>, and, especially, as regards the kind of relationship that it bears with its

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<sup>2</sup> Cfr. *The London Stage* for a precise record of plays performed during the period.

<sup>3</sup> Robert D. Hume’s (1983: 28) summary, although not exhaustive, usefully illustrates the variety of approaches:

The play has been variously read as a Hobbesian view of the world, an anatomy of masculinity, a comment on impotence and self-destruction, a satire on folly, a demonstration of the difference between love and lust, an analysis of marriage, a satire on selfishness, an account of “the question of freedom”, a satire on jealousy, and an anatomy of lust (among other things).

milieu<sup>4</sup>, they have been unanimous in singling it out as one of the wittiest and most entertaining Restoration comedies. It has always been placed side by side with other comedies of the 1670s, particularly Etherege's *Man of Mode*, which values verbal wit above any merit, and features characters accordingly<sup>5</sup>.

*The Country Wife*, moreover, has a quality that is not commonly found in the comedies of the 1670s, its careful structure, that skilfully links clarity of plot and variety of incident, two qualities that Dryden, in his *Essay of Dramatic Poesie* regarded as the basic constituents of the best English drama, that went beyond the restrictions of the Classical unities, so revered by contemporary French playwrights, and more loosely understood by English playwrights, who, in his view, enabled more lasting entertainment.

Whereas most Restoration comedies stress verbal wit above any other quality, and often disregard the importance of plot as secondary to it, Wycherley's previous acquaintance with drama led him to take greater care of dramatic structure than had usually been the rule. In his two previous comedies: *Love in a Wood* and *The Gentleman Dancing Master* he had alternatively favoured variety of plot above unity of matter and vice-versa. The reaction he had got from the audience had made him choose a middle path for his masterpiece, where he allowed space for both elements<sup>6</sup>.

*The Country Wife*, by exhibiting both verbal wit and a careful structure, was bound to become a canonical play, and so it would, although often in adapted versions, which were made in response to the reaction elicited from audiences. Even though we have often been led to believe that this play was extraordinarily popular in its own day<sup>7</sup>, records of performance speak to the

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<sup>4</sup> Extremes vary between those that hold that *The Country Wife* is a stern satire of arranged marriages (Zimbardo, 1973 [1965]: 526) and those who champion it as the embodiment of an imaginative play set completely apart from its social background, by creating a world of its own, comparable to that of fairyland (Lamb, 1973 [1822]: 480).

<sup>5</sup> This kind of comedies, however, had their high peak in the mid 1670s, but they ceased to be written before the end of the decade. Cfr. Scouten, 1976 [1966]: 64.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Katharine Rogers (1972) and W. P. Chadwyck (1975) for a systematic analysis of Wycherley's evolution as a dramatist.

<sup>7</sup> As early as 1699, Gerard Langbaine in his *Lives and Characters of the English Dramatic Poets* said the following about *The Country Wife*: "This play from the beginning has been frequently acted with great applause". And he referred to a 4th edition from 1683, a year when, according to him, *The Country Wife* "was acted at the Theatre Royal". It is somewhat surprising to state that the entry in the *London Stage* for this year gives "NONE, Sep. 0", and that it is only preceded by three more stagings, that add up to a total of three performances since its première: Drury Lane Jan. 12, 15 1675 and D. L. May 16, 1676. The play doesn't seem to have been revived more often during the first decade of the eighteenth century, for it was only staged twice in 1701, followed by another performance in 1702 and only two more in 1709. In spite of this apparent lack of success, Langbaine had no doubts about the excellency of its author, who, in his view, "excell'd all writers in all languages, in Comedy".

contrary, since it was scarcely staged during the first three decades following its première. The reason for it probably lies in its outspoken tone, that must have bothered more members of the audience than many theoretical accounts regarding its composition would have led us to believe<sup>8</sup>. The moderate success of the play speaks of but a limited presence of aristocratic libertines, as compared to that of more traditional playgoers<sup>9</sup>, in line with those described by Pepys in his diary, who, on this occasion, don’t seem to have felt intimidated by the presence of their liberal neighbours. The truth is that spontaneous complaints from the audience were made on the spot, and immediately recorded, so that they can be counted among the first written testimonies of the sort<sup>10</sup>.

Audience spontaneity does not seem to have been an exception in England and it truly was not restricted to this particular play, but became fully imbedded into their theatrical habits<sup>11</sup>. Playwrights, managers,

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<sup>8</sup> W. Gerald Marshall (1989: 421), in line with the conclusions reached by Harold Weber (1986), summarizes this situation as follows: “The type of *blatant and chronic sexuality* displayed in *Restoration Comedies* was *by no means representative* of Restoration sexual values and standards; rather, it represents the activity of a small court circle and does not reflect the *rational, socially acceptable values of seventeenth-century England*”. It is therefore no wonder that, as Hume (1983: 48) points out: “Only a *tiny handful of plays* present (let alone support) the sort of *libertinism* for which Restoration comedy was long notorious”. An analysis that Maximilian E. Novak has recently (2001: 54) tried to reverse, when stressing that “*almost all of these plays are indeed about sex* to a degree, and some of them are exclusively about sex”. He tries to substantiate his hypothesis that most of them portray a libertine point of view by linking this feature with a French tradition that highlights hedonism (2001: 66), and, in his attempt to make his hypothesis valid for the whole period, he goes as far as to find a libertine component at the root of sentimental comedy:

Libertinism did not die, despite being banished from stage presentations, but it had to fight a losing battle against sensibility, the dominant attitude of the eighteenth century (...). In some ways, *sensibility absorbed libertinism* by presenting itself both as a form of spontaneous behaviour based on direct emotion and as highly pleasurable, more pleasurable in its emphasis on benevolence and sympathy (...) than the individual hedonism of the libertine.

I wonder whether this same reasoning would not succeed in portraying the zeal of the reformers of manners as equally hedonistic and, therefore, as “libertine” (since it pleased their innermost inclinations to purify the stage).

<sup>9</sup> As a number of critics (Avery, 1966; Love, 1980; Scouten and Hume, 1980) have convincingly argued, audiences, even in the 1660s, were socially and politically heterogeneous, and, as Avery (1966: 61) concludes, they were “of good and ordinary education”.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr., for example, J. R. Smith, 1948: 132 and Hume, 1983: 58 and 153.

<sup>11</sup> A note in Cross’s Diary, entered on February, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1748, vividly illustrates the behaviour of audiences. He writes: “There was a report that my Lord Hubbard had made a party this night to *hiss The Foundling* off the stage, that ye reason was that it ran too long and they wanted variety of entertainments”.

prompters and actors were well aware of this fact, and reacted accordingly, by trying to adapt their plays to the demands of the public, as the *Prologue* to Garrick's *The Country Girl* (1819), openly admits:

But we, the actors, humbly will submit,  
Now, and at any time, to a full pit.  
Nay, often we anticipate your rage,  
And *murder poets for you on our stage*<sup>12</sup>.

Economic reasons are on the surface, for it is “a full pit” that they all depend on for a living. It is therefore by suiting the plays to their tastes that a sustained success can be expected. Moreover, since tastes evolve, it concerns them to modify their plays accordingly, and they usually did, as the long theatrical history of *The Country Wife* attests<sup>13</sup>.

The particular situation of English drama at the time, where a lasting monopoly dispersed all fears regarding the publication of texts that might have been pirated by other companies, had they existed, contributed to the considerable amount of printed texts that were published in connection with specific performances, and that were in high demand by the reading public. The span of time between the performance of a play and its publication was progressively abridged, so that, by the middle of the century, playgoers often took their pocket editions (usually published in 8°) to the theatre<sup>14</sup>, and sometimes performances and published texts were advertised together. This is the case, for example, with John Lee's 1765 *Benefit Night*, which took place on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April. Audiences were informed that both tickets and texts could be purchased in the same place, that is to say, at “La Grange's Medicinal Warehouse, in New-Street, Covent-Garden”.

It is probably no mere coincidence that the publishing date of printed editions tends to coincide with successful theatrical seasons. Thus, the 1733 edition of Wycherley's *The Country Wife* was issued a year when the play was performed 6 times. Since it was regularly performed each season (it was annually revived since 1715 up to 1749), a reading demand was probably the

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This kind of behaviour reminds us of Ravenscroft's earlier allusion (1683: *Preface to Dame Dobson*) to the menacing visits of Ladies of Quality: “Cause some squeamish Females of Renown /Made visits with design *to cry it [the play] down*”. My italics.

<sup>12</sup> My italics.

<sup>13</sup> *Cfr.* Freehafer, 1950, for a more detailed view of the changes that Restoration drama was already experiencing at the end of the 1670s. It is no coincidence, as Michael Dobson (2000: 50) points out, that affective tragedy emerged precisely in the late 1670s and early 1680s, what conditioned the stress that rewritings of old plays placed on private pathos.

<sup>14</sup> *Cfr.* Stone Peters (2000: 49-50) as well as the previous work by Peter Holland (1979).

reason why another edition with very slight changes appeared three years later. A text was also printed in 1751, two years before the last performance of the play preceding its revision in the 1760s<sup>15</sup>.

No matter how many passages were purged for performance, published texts tended to offer complete plays, since censors were not concerned about any serious damage being made to readers<sup>16</sup>. Even as late as 1765, when John Lee had his version of the play published, a hint was made at the free circulation of Wycherley’s complete text, which was no longer suitable for the audience of his day, but that could be freely perused in the closet: “Many characters of the original comedy are left out, for reasons that will be obvious to all who may chuse to read the play itself; and such as are retained will, it is hoped, be thought, at least, inoffensively humorous”.

While advertising texts, emphasis was placed on their theatrical nature, for it was “acting” editions and not literary texts that were in high demand. Readers wished to have as much information as possible on the actual performance, so that it was customary to include the whole cast list and even commentaries on the performance of individual actors. It is worth noticing, for example, that Garrick, well aware of the centrality of actors in the theatre of his day, gave as the main reason for his 1766 adaptation of *The Country Wife* the fact that an actress, Miss Reynolds, was available to perform the part of the female protagonist: “The desire of shewing Miss Reynolds to Advantage, was the first motive for attempting an alteration of Wycherley’s *Country Wife*”. Playbills equally echoed their importance, and, on this particular occasion, the play was advertised by indicating that Garrick himself had “taken many pains in teaching Miss Reynolds, who was approved by the public in his character”. This view, however, was not universally shared, as *The London Chronicle* stated in November 11-13, 1766: “*Miss Reynolds does not appear to that advantage in this piece she could in many others*”<sup>17</sup>. And it goes on to assert that she was a “raw and inexperienced actress”. The same viewpoint was shared by Thomas Davies (1780: II, 121), who was of the opinion that “*Miss Reynolds*, though not

<sup>15</sup> As the *Thespian Dictionary* (1805) points out, the reason why *The Country Wife* was dropped from the stage in 1753 was that “it was then unpalatable to the public taste”. Cfr. Gray (1931) for a more detailed analysis of the change of attitude towards stock plays during the 1750s and 1760s.

<sup>16</sup> Colley Cibber (1966[1788], IV: 108), for example, in the *Preface* to his *Provoked Husband*, established a clear distinction between stage and page censorship. He called attention to the fact that in his printed text “the Reader will (...) find a Scene or two of the lower Humour, that were left out after the first Day’s Presentation”.

Matthew J. Kinservik (2001: 42) fittingly isolates the years of the Exclusion crisis and the Popish plot (1678-83) as the period when this distinction between stage and press censorship could be most clearly perceived.

<sup>17</sup> My italics.

deficient in merit, *neither in age, person, or look could pretend to be the innocent and simple lass of sixteen*"<sup>18</sup>.

That the latter opinion must have been prevalent is attested by the fact that Miss Reynolds was replaced by Mrs. Abington the following season (starting Nov. 16, 1767). In this case, however, a different reason must be sought for the short span of time she held the role, which, in spite of her excellent performance, was equally limited to the season 1767-68, to be succeeded by an equally successful Miss Burton who didn't remain long on stage either (1768-1770). A new actress, Miss Robins, was chosen for the 1774-75 revival of the play, but she would not play the part again, in spite of her satisfactory performance.

The constant need to look for new actresses to perform the role of Peggy probably has more to do with the intrinsic qualities of Garrick's version than with the acting of the part itself. Such a dramatically deficient version as his could only be rescued by an outstanding performance of the main part, as would be the case when it was later revived in 1785. On that occasion the unanimously praised performance of Mrs. Jordan was enough to attract large numbers of spectators to the theatre for a number of years, even though many of them were aware of the scarce dramatic merits of the text, as Madame d'Arblay made explicit after attending a performance on the 26 of July, 1788: "*Mrs. Jordan played the Country Girl most admirably but the play is (...) disagreeable in its whole plot and tendency*"<sup>19</sup>.

Her gaiety, playfulness and vivacity, that were often praised by critics<sup>20</sup> were probably enough to compensate for the play's lack of wit and tediousness, that were often underlined by reviewers.

That the performance of an outstanding actress was an essential factor for the popularity of a given play can also be stated in the case of Lee's version, whose most successful seasons coincided with the notable performance both of Mrs. Wilson<sup>21</sup> (1776-77) and Mrs. Brown (1786-87). The latter's doubtless merits, however, seem to have been unable to compete with Mrs. Jordan's vivacity in trying to enliven a twice revised adaptation that was as dull as Garrick's and even less coherent than his.

Regular members of the audience, who were used to seeing the same plays performed in succeeding seasons, took greater interest in stating how a particular part was performed by a particular actor than in the playtexts

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<sup>18</sup> My italics.

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. Barrett (1905: IV, 47). My italics.

<sup>20</sup> Cfr, for example, *The World*, April 7, 1788.

<sup>21</sup> *The London Magazine* (46, January 1777) considered her as "one of the best actresses that has appeared these twenty years on a London stage".

themselves. This was the case to such an extent that good performances sometimes had to be repeated if the audience craved it<sup>22</sup>, and their applause more than once led to the end of the play, no matter whether it was finished or not, as Richard Bentley (1761: 199) admitted in *The Wishes*: “The beginnings and ends of plays were never wrote to be heard”. Actors, however, were also exposed to the rage of their public, and if denounced for obscenity, immorality or treason, they could be punished accordingly. This is why, more than once, they dropped parts that they were supposed to deliver on stage, or simply modified them so as to protect their own reputations<sup>23</sup>. Some actors performing *Volpone* in 1700, for example, were prosecuted for immorality. They presumably added extempore lines of their own devising<sup>24</sup>.

This situation makes it difficult to decide what kind of performances could have been derived from a particular script, since texts were never considered sacred, but were constantly changed in reply to the demands of the audience. Ravenscroft, as early as 1683, writes a prologue to his *Dame Dobson* where he expresses his readiness to change his text to suit the tastes of his public: “If he finds you falter, he quickly will his way of writing alter”.

Playwrights, specially during the years when the *Licensing Act* was in force, not only tolerated changes into their scripts, but even made public acknowledgement of them. John Cleland, for example (Boaden, 1831-2, I: 544) told Garrick in a letter that he considered his text a “*rough draught*, susceptible of every addition or alteration that should appear requisite”<sup>25</sup>.

After rehearsal, plays were premièred, and the prompter took special note of audience response, so as to further adapt the play to their exigencies<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> As Thomas Davies (1784, II: 141) acknowledges: “[The actor] as the servant and creature of the public ought not to refuse repeating any line or sentence when demanded by the spectators”.

<sup>23</sup> Stern (2000: 286) goes as far as to say: “An audience might, as a result of actor’s revision, never see a play as written at all”.

<sup>24</sup> *Cfr. Public Record Office, King’s Bench 10-11, London and Middlesex Indictments, Easter 13. William III*, that records an indictment charging several actors and actresses with having acted profane and pernicious comedies at Drury Lane between June 24, 1700 and February 24, 1701. Actors seem to have improvised on Act IV, Scene i.

<sup>25</sup> Reverend Charles Jenner (Boaden, 1831-2, i: 383) went as far as to tell him that he would “esteem those parts that you shall please to correct, the most valuable part of the work”, and Oxberry’s 1819 edition of *The Country Girl* similarly boasted that “[the play] as a production for the stage has been infinitely improved by his [Garrick’s] judicious alterations”.

<sup>26</sup> Cross, for example, wrote on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 1763, after the performance of *The Dupe*: “This night the passages that seem’d to give offense were omitted. A little hissing, but not so much as [on] the first night. Went off pretty well, tho’ ’twas expected the audience would not suffer it to be acted”. As Kitty Clive (1753: 14) acknowledged in *The Rehearsal*, plays were not looked upon as finished objects whose meaning could only be fully understood and explained by their authors, but, rather, as entities open to the experience of actors on stage, whose suggestions playwrights gratefully took into account for further re-writing: “From him [the author] the learning of the part

Plays were, in short, living and changeable objects, whose nature cannot be exactly determined. Consequently, the different eighteenth century editions and adaptations of the play can only be approached bearing this in mind.

This relative nature of playtexts, for example, could only possibly explain that such an unequal play as John Lee's 1786's adaptation of *The Country Wife* could hold the stage for 12 nights, while Garrick's version was simultaneously performed at the Drury Lane, as well as at the Hammersmith during the summer months. It is only conceivable that the uncountable incongruencies found in the published text were, at least partially, solved in performance, presumably after the first night. Contrary to what some critics have held, group rehearsal seems to have been the exception rather than the norm, and actors often learned their parts without regard to those of the others<sup>27</sup>. It is therefore likely that the numerous flaws of structure and characterization in this version were only evident after the first performance, and then partially solved, although the fact that its last performance took place the following year (Covent Garden, February, 17<sup>th</sup>), whereas Garrick's version continued to hold the stage for the remaining of the century and well into the next one, leads us to doubt that it was properly done, especially if we take into account that Garrick's version, though theatrically acceptable, was far from perfect<sup>28</sup>.

John Lee's 1786 version of the play shows all the signs of haste, and the reason openly lies in the wish not to let escape a promising theatrical market that the recent revival of Garrick's version a few months earlier (Drury Lane, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1785 ) had opened up, after a 12 year absence of the play from the stage<sup>29</sup>.

This version, however, surprisingly contrasts with the effective adaptation John Lee had made of the play in 1765, that far surpassed the quality of

must be communicated to his instrument, *the player*: If he is a master in his profession, he will, in his turn, *impart useful hints to the poet*, which will contribute to the *improvement of the scene*".

<sup>27</sup> Although this point is stressed by G. W. Stone Jr. (1962: xciv-xcv), later research has found evidence for the contrary, as Stern (2000: 270) points out: "Against the tales of Garrick's careful rehearsals, are tales of extraordinary negligence". These, according to him, (269) are due, among other reasons, to scarcity of group rehearsal: "Partial rehearsals followed one after another; the notion of a complete play as a single unity was thus seldom paramount before 'final' rehearsals".

<sup>28</sup> Frederick Seeley (1937: 217), for example, fittingly called it "wretched".

<sup>29</sup> According to the advertisement in the playbills, the play "had not been acted these 12 years, and they specify December, 16<sup>th</sup>, as the last date. *The London Stage*, however, records another performance that took place the following year, on March, 7<sup>th</sup>. Garrick's adaptation enjoyed 21 performances since October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1785 until December 29<sup>th</sup>, 1786, to be followed by another eleven stagings in 1787 whereas Lee's adaptation, although it proved equally successful during 1786, with a total 11 performances, took its final leave from the stage the following year, when it was only performed once (Covent Garden, February 17<sup>th</sup>).

Garrick’s 1766 version, in spite of which, there is a rhetorical apology in Lee’s text for any misprints or errors that might have unwillingly appeared<sup>30</sup>, due to the haste of preparing an edition on occasion of a benefit night<sup>31</sup>. Lee’s 1786 version, curiously enough, emends the scarce errors found in the sections of the text taken from his first version<sup>32</sup>, only to leave visible mistakes in the remaining part of the script, where a careless combination is attempted between parts of his adaptation and some scenes from Garrick’s version.

Lee’s 1765 careful and dramatically effective adaptation successfully held the stage for a number of years<sup>33</sup>, but Garrick’s version would be later preferred, probably due to its more romantic tone as well as to the extreme care that had been taken to free the text from any potential term of abuse<sup>34</sup>. Garrick’s text was not as comical as that by Lee, but it still retained a part of humour, and even though his characters were not as fully developed and the changes in the course of action were less motivated, the play still retained a simplicity of plot and a double happy ending that fulfilled the audience’s

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<sup>30</sup> This seems to have been a common practice around the middle of the century. In fact, the editors of Beaumont and Fletcher’s *Comedies and Tragedies* made a similar apology in 1647: “For literall errors committed by the Printer, ’tis the fashion to aske pardon, and as much in fashion to take no notice of him that asks it”.

<sup>31</sup> He says: “The following scenes, being intended for a Representation upon a Benefit Night Only, were compil’d with so much haste and inaccuracy, that several mistakes in the copy were obliged to be rectified (See the subjoin’d Errata)”.

<sup>32</sup> Such as “Ned” for “Frank” or “to-morrow” for “this morning”.

<sup>33</sup> Starting in April, 1765 and continuing up to November, 1782. It was staged five times in 1765, and then retired from the stage while Garrick’s version was performed during 1766 (15 times) and 1767 (3 times). It returned in 1768 (9 performances), when Garrick’s adaptation was only performed twice. They continued to be staged simultaneously during 1769 (twice Lee, against four times Garrick) Lee’s version then gave way to Garrick from 1771 to 1775 (a total of 7 performances). And the situation was reversed from 1776 to 1782, when only Lee’s version was performed, first with notable success (13 performances in the season 1776-77), then less so (only one performance in 1779 and 1782, respectively). This contrasted with the successful revival of Garrick’s version, that returned to the stage in 1785, nine years after his retirement from Drury Lane.

<sup>34</sup> It expressly admitted that changes had been made “to fit the times”. As a matter of fact, the number of testimonies in favour of a kind of entertainment that could expose vice and promote virtue was on the increase, as Emmett L. Avery, among others, has underlined (1942:141-2). The testimony he quotes from the *Public Ledger* (September 25, 1765) is revealing of the moral climate that gave rise to a wave of rewritings of Restoration dramas, which resorted to the concept of ‘utility’ as an euphemistic term for encouraging such changes. The text reads as follows: “In real utility, I shall not hesitate to give the poets of the present hour a considerable superiority. *Wycherley, Etheridge, and their contemporaries*, were possessed of parts *rather brilliant than useful* (...) hence decency and good sense were continually sacrificed to an ill-timed emanation of vivacity”.

expectation of spending an agreeable evening in a variety show, where this play was but a small part of the whole<sup>35</sup>.

This demand for a variety of entertainments in the same evening was already fashionable at the beginning of the century, and it was often taken to be a helpful means of attracting audiences towards plays that would have otherwise proven unpopular because of their complexity. As early as 1705, Ben Jonson's most popular comedy, *Volpone*, was already staged as part of a varied spectacle, where lighter pieces could compensate for what was considered to be a difficult play<sup>36</sup>. This type of mixed spectacles involved the shortening of plays, so as to avoid too long theatrical evenings<sup>37</sup>. Their running time would be reduced as the century went by, and they would even be transformed into short afterpieces, so as to keep them alive on stage. *Volpone*, for example, had to be reduced so that it could be performed in two hours instead of the two hours and a half that it required, and that was the time allotted for tragedies. Running times would be progressively reduced, so that the Oxberry Edition of Garrick's *The Country Girl, a Comedy Altered from Wycherley* (1819), specifies that the play was to be performed in exactly one hour and thirty-four minutes<sup>38</sup>. The same volume contains Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, that is to be performed in no longer than one hour, forty five minutes.

A look at the programme that audiences of Garrick's 1785 revival of *The Country Girl* were offered, places it within a common tendency, that favoured music and dance in the form of interludes or afterpieces, especially during the third quarter of the eighteenth century. A look at the playbill reveals that, in addition to a theatrical afterpiece, *The Caldron*, spectators who attended Drury Lane on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October could also enjoy a *Provincalle* at the end of the second act of the mainpiece, and another dance (by Hamoir, Mrs. Sutton and others) in afterpiece.

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<sup>35</sup> The playbill of its première in Drury Lane, October, 25, 1766, announced that it was to be followed by *The Lying Varlet*, and, two days later, it shared evening with *The Devil is in Him*.

<sup>36</sup> According to Percy Fitzgerald (1882, I: 240), one of the players from Drury Lane told a strolling actor: "*Volpone* (...) will hardly fetch us a tolerable audience, unless we stuff the bills with long entertainments of dances, songs, scaramouched entries, and what not". And Emmett L. Avery (1934: 418) in his seminal study on the increasing importance of this varied type of spectacle, went as far as to suggest that it could even eclipse the main piece: "Entertainments seemed frequently to dominate the comedy or tragedy with which they were presented".

<sup>37</sup> Lee, accordingly, had transformed Wycherley's *The Country Wife* into a two-act afterpiece, that was staged on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1765 preceded by *The Winter's Tale*, and followed, first, by a piece of dancing, and, then, by *Tambourine*.

<sup>38</sup> And it goes as far as to indicate how many minutes each single act is expected to last: 15 min. for the first act, 21 for the second; 15 for the third; 25 for the fourth, and 18 for the 5<sup>th</sup> act.

Curiously enough, those attending the play for a second time on the 24<sup>th</sup> of October, were not offered a different afterpiece as a means of drawing them to the playhouse again, but, rather, a “new comic dance”, *The Market*, performed at the end of Act II.

Playbills also highlight another key element in the theatrical life of the eighteenth century, that is to say, its performers. It is interesting to realize, in this particular case, that the actress performing the role of *Country Girl* (Peggy in Garrick’s version), Mrs. Jordan, was devoted extra space, by announcing that it was her “first appearance in London”. Leigh Hunt’s observations (1785: 127) on her performance during that night makes one feel that she was perfectly suited to her role. Hunt stresses the “natural” quality of her laughter, the “melodious” and “delightful” nature of her voice, and her ability to “pierce our feelings with a most original simplicity” through her songs. All these qualities lead us to think that hers was a perfect embodiment of that most natural character, the creation of Garrick, that, though as unlettered as her predecessor, Margery Pinchwife, was, nevertheless, found delightful by theatrical character (Belville, who marries her) and real audience alike.

The diminished importance of wit, both in the theatre and in daily life, is symbolically epitomized in the change introduced by Garrick into the dénouement of the play, since a well bred youth is ready to share his life with an uncultivated, good looking, country wench. The lack of sophistication in both characters allows the playwright to dispense with any kind of verbal wit that might have baffled his audience. Good feelings seem to have been more highly valued by audiences, as Hunt’s remarks on Bannister Junior in the role of Belville (1785: 125), as performed on the 18<sup>th</sup> October, 1785, leads us to think: “His expression of *jovial honesty*, or what may be termed *heartiness*, is the most prominent”.

The playbill from the 24<sup>th</sup> of October draws our attention to a change in the actress who performed the role of Alithea, the other female protagonist of the play, who also ends up in happy marriage. Whereas the role was played by Mrs. Ward on the opening night (Oct. 18<sup>th</sup>), it had been assigned to Miss Tidswell on this occasion. It is not difficult to guess that perfect acting was not likely to be expected, if one takes into account that she could not have spent over six days to rehearse her part. Theatre managers, well aware of the importance that actors and actresses had to draw audiences to their houses, took good care to inform them about any changes in the cast, and they even apologized for them on the stage, what might have been the case on this occasion as well.

Since there was a larger offer of stock plays than of new pieces, audiences were well acquainted with them and were quick to perceive any changes.

Maybe this could explain the record-breaking number of performances of both Garrick's adaptation and Lee's revised version that took place simultaneously in 1786 (14 for Garrick's play and 11 for Lee's). It is easy to imagine members of the audience trying to check what parts of Garrick's version had been introduced into Lee's adaptation, and, since portable printed versions were readily available to them, they might have also spent a busy evening trying to spot the uncountable errors that had slipped into Lee's 1786 text<sup>39</sup>, that didn't take advantage of the sound changes that he had introduced into his first revision, staged in 1765<sup>40</sup>.

Lee's first version had succeeded in reducing its running time without losing its clarity of plot. Changes in the course of action were carefully motivated, so that the behaviour of characters also proved more natural. Finally, Lee's accommodation to the requirements of his age, that didn't tolerate either lengthy plays or eccentric characters, didn't prevent his retaining a certain degree of wit in his lines.

The audience was therefore offered a play with an amiable tone and a happy ending, that perfectly suited the times. As compared with Wycherley's, it removed the coarsest of the three plots, where Horner, pretending to be impotent, had free access to a number of respectable women, who thus took revenge on their loveless husbands.

As regards the second plot, he basically maintains its romantic quality, that leads to the final marriage between Harcourt and Alithea, who breaks the engagement her brother Pinchwife had previously arranged with the fop Sparkish. Even though the argument is basically the same as in Wycherley, Lee improves its structure by taking special care of anticipating changes in the course of action. In Lee's adaptation, Alithea's change of mind regarding the identity of her future husband no longer comes as a surprise to the audience, since they have been allowed to share in her most inner thoughts, as revealed in the monologue that she delivers before breaking her engagement with Sparkish. There Alithea comes to the conclusion that she has no need to marry a fop whom she doesn't love and who doesn't care

<sup>39</sup> As *The Morning Chronicle* (26 March 1773) reports for a 1773 performance of Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, "almost every one present had the play in their hands". Quoted in Goldsmith (1966, V: 93)

<sup>40</sup> This version had enjoyed its greater success during the season 1776-1777, when it run for thirteen performances. It is worth noticing, however, that even though Garrick's version was then absent from the stage, a new edition of his adaptation was issued precisely in 1777. And it is somewhat surprising to spot a significant mistake in the title page, for, instead of *The Country Girl*, which was the title Garrick had given to his own version, it reads as *The Country Wife*, which corresponds to Lee's title. This printing error can be taken as a mere accident or, rather, as an intentional means on Garrick's side of not wholly disappearing from the theatrical arena, precisely when the text of his competitor was being acclaimed on the stage.

about her. Unlike in Wycherley, Alithea gives Harcourt some hints that allow him to expect a favourable change. Finally, Sparkish is also allowed to guess what his lot is going to be, as he tells Pinchwife when he speaks of his pending *fracas*.

Anticipation is also taken good care of in the other argument that Lee borrows from Wycherley, though, in this case, he introduces important changes into it. The more moderate tone of the play doesn’t allow the rake (Dorilant instead of Horner in this case) to awaken Margery to the pleasures of the town as thoroughly as in Wycherley. Even though he approaches her in the theatre, nothing serious happens, since Pinchwife never loses sight of her long enough for anything to occur. In Lee’s first version, Margery is not taken to the theatre in male attire, so that she has no chance of disappearing with the rake she meets on her way to the playhouse, and neither is she later delivered to him under somebody else’s disguise (Alithea’s).

But even though Margery is not allowed to savour town life completely, she still gets to discover the glamour of its gallants, that strongly attract her. Her innocence leads her –as in Wycherley– to reveal her husband what her feelings towards Dorilant (Horner in Wycherley) are. As in Wycherley, Pinchwife is an old, jealous husband, but here he handles both his wife and his sister less roughly, in line with the end of this plot, that Lee modifies to please a good-hearted audience.

Pinchwife, unlike in Wycherley, admits that he is to blame for the unequal nature of his marriage, since it has been his own device to marry a woman his junior by thirty years<sup>41</sup>. But, since it is now too late to change this state of affairs, his sister suggests him to allow his wife a greater degree of freedom<sup>42</sup>, and, especially, to provide her with innocent entertainments that might prevent more dangerous ones.

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<sup>41</sup> Pinchwife movingly admits: “How could I reasonably expect happiness, when *I was destitute of every requisite* that should form it? *Similitude of years, tempers, manners*; and in short, all the qualities that can endear a heart, and warm it into love!”.

This same view had already been voiced in 1683 (Anonymous, 1683: 48) by “A person of quality of the female sex” who said: “Never let him [an old husband] be disquieted at what his young brisk and dissatisfied wife does, when *he is the only occasion of all she does himself*”. And blames him for inflicting great suffering upon his wife: “If an old Hunks without life or vigour, have such an inclination to leachery, (...) let him not go about to *make a young* and better-deserving *Gentlewoman’s life miserable* and loathsome to her, where she expects her greater felicity and enjoyment”.

<sup>42</sup> Alithea says: “would you be happy together? Take my advice? *Release her from her bondage; let her associate with the innocent and sensible of both sexes*; and improve that mind, which has hitherto been too un-informed, to defend itself from the attacks of its own passions, or from those of others”.

This very idea is also stressed in the anonymous (1683: 34) Fifteen real comforts of matrimony, where its author says: “Men do not marry to bury their wives alive in a house (...) And a man had better be over-indulgent to his wife in point of liberty, than be accounted her Jaylor”.

Lee, thus, adapts his plot to the requirements of reform comedy, greatly favoured by his audience<sup>43</sup>, and, by taking good care of anticipating changes in the behaviour of its characters, he transforms the play into a coherent whole, where Wycherley's three arguments with different views on love and marriage are brought down to two, that share an optimistic view of human nature. The greater scope that Lee allows to the development of his characters<sup>44</sup> provides a fuller motivation for both plots.

At the same time, Lee's version meets his audience's demand for a convincing moral tone. He succeeds in achieving it through the employment of devices that somewhat differ from those that Garrick would resort to a few months later, since, whereas the development of Lee's characters as shown on stage is the clearest proof of the plausibility of their statements, Garrick's abridged presentation of them makes their behaviour appear sudden and unexpected. An extreme example of this way of dealing with character presentation affects Alithea's change of mind regarding her own marriage, that, unlike in Lee, is not prepared for by means of a suitable monologue<sup>45</sup>. Alithea's change of attitude towards Sparkish comes unexpectedly in Garrick, because, all of a sudden, she breaks up her engagement with Sparkish and replaces her stubborn decision of marrying a fop she does not love with a sneering handling of him<sup>46</sup>.

Lee's depiction of Alithea as a sensible character had made her suitable to voice the moral message of the play, that, unlike Garrick's, openly reflects on

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<sup>43</sup> Whose essential quality, as pointed out by Stuart Tave (1960) in regard to the comedies they favoured, was their belief in the tractability of human nature. This gave rise to *Reform Comedy* as an eighteenth century subgenre that replaced *contemptuous* (Wycherley's) with *sympathetic laughter* (Lee's).

<sup>44</sup> Cfr. Donohue (1970) on the move towards subjectivity in dramatic character, that was already noticeable in the 1770s.

<sup>45</sup> Lee's Alithea realizes that the match her brother has arranged for her is unsavory and unfair: "Why do I make such a *sacrifice* to the will, or rather, *avarice* of a brother? (...) where lies the justice (...) in *giving away my person without my heart*?"

A similar concern is expressed by a "Sorrowful and Afflicted Daughter" (Anonymous, 1687) in a letter addressed to her Parents "that would have her Matched to one whom she cannot Love": "(...) but if you do resolve that I shall Marry, let it be to one that I can love, or to my Grave, be not over ruled by the thoughts of Avarice".

<sup>46</sup> Sparkish's report of her reaction widely differs from Alithea's behaviour in Lee's version: "She walk'd up within pistol-shot of the church, then twirl'd round upon her heel, *call'd me every name* she could think of; and when she had exhausted her imagination, and tired her tongue (...) she *sent her footman to buy a monkey* before my face, then *bid me good morrow with a sneer*, and left us with our mouths open in the middle of a hundred people".

the state of marriage. Lee therefore replaces Wycherley’s crude satire on marriage<sup>47</sup> with a milder kind of criticism that ends up in a tone of hope<sup>48</sup>.

Garrick, however, proves less interested in delivering a moral message to his audience than in offering them a play with a happy ending. That is what leads him to give a romantic bias to Margery’s plot, that no longer deals with the problems of a married couple, as it had done both in Wycherley and in Lee. Margery, who is called Peggy in Garrick’s version<sup>49</sup>, is given a true opportunity of leading a happy life, since she is only engaged to Pinchwife, but hasn’t married him yet. At the same time, the man approaching her (Belville) is no longer a rake (Horner in Wycherley; Dorilant in Lee) with no

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<sup>47</sup> Barbara Kachur’s (2004: 152) conclusion on the type of criticism that Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* makes is particularly sound. According to her, “Wycherley was neither championing women’s rights nor advocating adultery, but he did, however, *examine male-female relationships in marriage* through a lens that viewed *husbands as the oppressors* (...) and the *wives as rebels who resist tyranny*”. This unequal situation was sometimes verbalized during the period, as Mary Astell acknowledges in her *Essay of Marriage* (1696). Hers is not the attitude of the rebel who openly tries to subvert the prevailing situation but, even though a tone of moderation is characteristic of her statements, she nevertheless lets her voice be clearly heard in her advices to naïve ladies who are looking forward to getting married. To start with, she reminds her readers (1696: 2) that “the Laws of God and Nations have given *man the supream authority in marriage*”, which she doesn’t question, though she recommends wives to bear it with resignation, and she warns young ladies (1696: 1) that marriage is seldom the blessed state they often imagine: “Those that are in extraordinary haste for a settlement, (as they call it) do commonly Advance their Expectation of Happiness, much beyond what they have Possessed in a Single Life, and many times *the Imaginary Heaven proves a Hell*”. This situation was more than once the outcome of economic interests in matches, particularly during the Restoration, when many families tried to recover part of their estates by this means. As P. F. Vernon (1962: 370-87) has interestingly argued, playwrights showed their disagreement with this situation by means of their plays, and, instead of championing a libertine code of behaviour, they often resisted a marriage of economic convenience, while supporting the ideal of a mutually satisfying relationship that made a happy and lasting marriage possible.

Voices could be heard for and against the relevance of economic concerns for future married couples. Whereas Francis Osborne (1655: 57) quite cynically advises his son to look for a good portion in a wife: “As the fertility of the ensuing year is guessed at, by the height of the river Nilus, so by the *greatnesse of a wives portion may much of the future conjugal happinesse be calculated*”, others (Anon. 1683: 41) consider those grounds to be degradating: “He that *marries a wife for the portions sake, buys a Concubine*, does not marry a wife”. In their view (Anon., 1683: 19), “Lawful matrimony (...) [can only be] the effect of *choice and mature consideration of the mutual temper and affection of both parties*”.

<sup>48</sup> That presides over Alithea’s words to her brother at the end of the play:

No more let anxious doubts o’er love preside,  
But generous confidence be virtue’s guide!  
Those wives are chastest, whom indulgence charms,  
Those husbands happiest, whom no fear alarms.

<sup>49</sup> By choosing this name for the character, Garrick tries to make his audience aware of the relationship his version bears to Wycherley’s play. As Hans & Hodges (1996) explain, *Peggy* is an “English variant of *Maggie*, or the obsolete *Meggie*, both pet forms of *Margaret*”.

intention of starting a lasting relationship with her, but a tender youth who immediately falls in love with Margery and ends up marrying her. Garrick, moreover, underlines the happy ending of the play by having Peggy exclaim: "I'm for always loving like a fool!"

This final romantic note no doubt contributed to the play's long popularity on stage, since it suited the tastes of eighteenth and nineteenth century audiences alike. As playwrights were well aware, audiences were becoming increasingly sensitive, what led them to reject any kind of harshness, both in plot and in language, particularly since the 1770s, and specially from the 1780s onwards. This helps understand why Lee's accomplished version lost favour around this time and led to a theatrical revision that took this aspect into account. The changes, however, were not carefully undertaken, and the outcome proved unequal, and, therefore, ephemeral.

Even though Lee had already freed Wycherley's text from most shocking expressions, he still retained some parts of dialogue because of their wit, what had to be sacrificed in his later updating of the play.

The absence of wit had proved no obstacle to the success of Garrick's version, since the greatest part of the audience was not highly intellectual<sup>50</sup>, though fairly squeamish about morals, and therefore preferred a dull play before an "immoral" one. Playwrights were so fully aware of this fact, that they even voiced it in the prefaces to their plays<sup>51</sup>. The editor of Garrick's 1808 edition of *The Country Girl*, for example, gives the "alterer's endeavour to clear one of our most celebrated comedies from immorality and obscenity" as the main reason for his re-writing of "neer half of the play". Aware that it is no longer as comical as it used to be<sup>52</sup>, he justifies its lack of wit on moral grounds, in a way that closely resembles the arguments that Collier had used

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<sup>50</sup> This was evidenced in their reaction to Jonson's *Volpone*, whose language they found difficult. Cfr., for example, Horace Walpole's (1798, ii: 315) assessment of the play, written sometime between 1775 and 1786, although collected for publication in 1798 as *Thoughts on Comedy*: "*Volpone* is faulty in the moral, and too elevated in the dialogue".

Around the same time, Thomas Davies (1783, ii: 98) stressed the high degree of complexity that the play had for average theatergoers, so that, according to him: "*Few, except the learned, can perfectly understand it*".

<sup>51</sup> This situation, however, was not new, as the *Prologue to Dame Dobson*, written in 1683, reveals. "The Squeamish Females of Renown" were there promised a play where "no line will tempt your minds to Evil", so as to avoid their enraged reaction that could "cry plays down". Lack of wit doesn't seem to be too serious a flaw, as long as the play is "civil": "'tis true, 'tis dull, but then 'tis very civil".

<sup>52</sup> As the *Prefatory Remarks* (1808: 5) reveal, the play had been "expunged of those parts of it, which probably were thought the most entertaining in the age when it was written, but which an improved taste delicately rejects".

to attack the Restoration stage around the turn of the previous century<sup>53</sup>. But his view, that didn’t have an immediate effect on the repertory of theatres<sup>54</sup>, was completely imbedded into the new plays and adaptations that audiences were ready to tolerate at the turn of the following century. Mrs. Inchbald’s 1808 edition of the play thus remarked that *no kind of wit ought to be received as an excuse for immorality* and she added: *nay, it becomes still more dangerous in proportion as it is more witty*<sup>55</sup>.

In the same way, Oxberry’s 1819 edition of the play unabashedly acknowledged: *there is not perhaps much wit or humour in the dialogue* but he tried to make up for this minor fault by saying that it was *entertaining*<sup>56</sup>.

It is true that in Garrick’s version we find neither Wycherley’s unbeatable instances of witty repartee, nor Lee’s more restrained passages of ingenious use of language, but, even though he doesn’t provide his audience with scenes as funny as those offered by Lee, he is careful enough to write some scenes that afford pleasurable moments to his audience.

Garrick does not have as witty a character as Lee’s Alithea, who delights the audience by means of her use of verbal ambiguity. When standing by her groom before a fake priest (Harcourt in disguise), she tells him about the priest he is expecting to marry them: “I now confess that that gentleman may marry one of us, but he shall never marry both”, thus hinting to the fact that the “priest” is no other than her beloved.

He neither presents them with a scene as hilarious as that where Lee has Sparkish collect and read the letter that Pinchwife has brought Dorilant from his own wife, and that he despisingly throws away. Unlike in Wycherley, Lee does not have Horner read the letter to himself and discover that Pinchwife has been outwitted by a resourceful wife who has written a love letter instead of a nasty farewell note, but has Sparkish read it aloud to a whole assembly of characters who delight in Pinchwife’s deserved humiliation.

<sup>53</sup> In Collier’s (1698: 161) view, “To make *delight* the main Business of Comedy is an unreasonable and *dangerous* Principle. It opens the way to all Licentiousness, and confounds the distinction between Mirth and Madness”. Moreover, by privileging delight over instruction, “the Marks of Honour and Infamy are Misapplied, and the idea’s of *Virtue and Vice Confounded*” (1698: 145).

<sup>54</sup> As a matter of fact, Steele in the *Tatler’s review* of the *Country Wife’s* performance at Will’s Coffee House on April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1709, Nr. 3, considers the play “a very pleasant and instructive satire”, and it goes as far as to attack the attitude of reformers of manners for their severity and as well as for ignoring this play’s serious moral function: “I cannot be of the same opinion with my friends, the reformers of manners, in their severity towards plays; but must allow that a good play acted before a well-bred audience must raise very proper incitements to good behaviour”.

*Cfr.*, in addition, Calhoun Winton (1974) for a more detailed view of the scarce impact that the Collier Controversy had on repertory offerings up to 1710.

<sup>55</sup> My italics.

<sup>56</sup> My italics.

This is precisely one of the scenes that Garrick takes dramatic advantage of in order to make his play “entertaining”. There are, however, substantial differences as regards theatricality, for Lee’s exhilarating scene is toned down to a more restrained kind of humour that avoids Pinchwife’s (Moody’s) public exposure<sup>57</sup>. In Garrick’s version the contents of Peggy’s love letter are silently read by Belville, who slyly asks Moody to tell its author that he will obey her in everything. The dramatic irony lies in the fact that Moody thinks his obedience consists in never seeing her again, whereas the audience is aware that Peggy has asked Belville to marry her.

This dramatic irony is enhanced at the end of the play, when Moody stands before Belville’s house in the belief that he is marrying his sister Alithea, whom he has escorted there. Only too late does he realize that it is not his sister, but Peggy in her clothes, that he has brought to Belville’s house for marriage.

The action reaches a melodramatic peak when, on the way to Belville’s house, Sparkish, heavily drunk, approaches the couple, and, deceived by Peggy’s disguise, tries to remove the veil that covers her face. He regrets Moody’s lack of honourability in giving his fiancée’s hand to somebody else, but Moody is in a hurry to have Belville marry Alithea, so as to make sure that he doesn’t marry Peggy. All his efforts, however, prove to be vain, to Sparkish’s delightful discovery. He cannot hide his inner satisfaction when he spots Harcourt coming along with Alithea, and introducing her to them as Mrs. Harcourt. It is no matter that he has lost Alithea, for he didn’t care much about her. What he finds satisfying, and partly compensates for his loss, is the punishment that Moody receives in kind for his lack of scruples.

He relishes stating Moody’s astonishment when he finds out the truth about Belville’s marriage. When he knocks at his door in despair, a servant calmly asks him to wait until his orders have been completely obeyed by his master. (Moody had asked him to do as told in Peggy’s letter).

But even though the play includes some funny scenes like this, it always takes good care to keep it within respectable bounds. That is why the play doesn’t end in a riotous note, but allows space for Peggy’s brief justification of her behaviour. She points out that Moody’s present disappointment is to be preferred before future suffering that would ensue from a loveless match: “twas honest to deceive him. / More virtuous sure to cheat him than to grieve him”.

Wycherley had already made use of the device of bringing Margery to Horner’s house disguised as Alithea, but, unlike Garrick, he didn’t sacrifice

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<sup>57</sup> This change is in line with the deliberate avoidance of caricature in the play as contrary to the ideal of naturalness in character portrayal: “*there is much whim but no caricature (...) the characters are natural and well discriminating*”.

direct presentation of events to the ideal of verosimilitude<sup>58</sup> since he took no great care to prepare the audience for that change. Garrick, however, scrupulously provided a reason for it. Already at the beginning of the play, instead of listening to Belville’s own account of his first approach to Peggy, we are told by his uncle Harcourt that his nephew had not kissed Peggy’s, but Alithea’s hands. Any degree of passionate feeling that could have been involved in his personal account is thus removed, merely as a way to anticipate Peggy’s use of Alithea’s clothes. This careful use of anticipation contrasts, however, with the scarce space Garrick usually allows his characters to reveal their own feelings, a dramatic flaw that was often due to the need of making the play as agile as possible.

This very constraint was probably the reason why Lee’s second adaptation neglects the use of dramatic anticipation, that he had superbly mastered in his first version. Severe cutting leads to a more superficial portrayal of his characters, whose reactions in his 1786 version are less clearly motivated.

Garrick’s interest in tightening up the action<sup>59</sup> in reply to the tastes of his audience had led him to bring the characters from both plots together in a number of scenes. An interesting case is the “park scene”, that Garrick adapts from Wycherley. In his version, Peggy is allowed to go out, disguised as a boy, so as to go unrecognised. Male characters, as in Wycherley, see through her disguise and approach her accordingly, although they handle her more gently<sup>60</sup>. Peggy, instead of being kissed and mousled by all rakes at hand, is given a

<sup>58</sup> The introduction to Garrick’s version (1819) reveals that verosimilitude was no indifferent matter to him, and he therefore underlines that “the plot is (...) sufficiently *probable*”.

<sup>59</sup> *Cfr.* the prefatory remarks to the 1819 edition of the play, where it is stated that “the incidents are not numerous, but to make amends are *compacted into a whole*”. And it adds: “The two parts of the plot are so *well linked together*, and so *intimately connected* that it is not very easy at first to distinguish the double fictions”. It looks as though there was an evident interest on the part of the editor to underline the dramatic correctness of the version, that seemed to fit to the rules listed by Edmund Burke in *The Reformer* (Nr. 2, February 4, 1748). The third of these rules was precisely “to conduct the Fable so *all the parts seem to depend one on another*, and center in the Conclusion as in a point”. This rule, like the ones related to the “propriety” of characters and to the moral aim of the piece, that Avery (1944: 146-7) fittingly highlighted as influential in mid-century drama (“By mid-century Burke’s views were those of a greater and often a more influential body of people”) seems to have enjoyed a long-lasting life, as the 1819 edition of Garrick’s version proves.

<sup>60</sup> It should be remembered, however, that this type of scenes continued to be popular on stage, and Garrick’s première in 1785 had benefitted from the performance of a promising actress, who would excel in “breeches parts”. Although this was Mrs. Jordan’s début in Drury Lane, she was immediately successful. Mrs. Inchbald’s 1808 edition of the play offers the whole cast, but carefully informs that she no longer performs that part, since she has left the stage. The truth is that she had been very busy bearing children (four by a young man, up to 1791, and ten more by the Duke of Clarence, later William IV, between 1791 and 1811, what allowed her time to act but intermittently.

chaste kiss by a promising youth who falls in love with her. When left on their own, Belville, instead of making love to her, gently asks her to marry him.

The park is also the meeting place of the other couple, whose mutual attraction has already been shown on stage, and whose obstacle –Sparkish– is about to be removed, so that they too may end up in happy marriage.

Lee's hasty borrowing of this part, however, gave rise to incongruous situations, that were only due to a lack of proper revision. That it had not been fully effected is revealed by the fact that some of the names from Garrick's version are still retained: *Belville*, for example is kept in the stage direction that should allude to Dorilant's kissing of Margery (*Belville kisses her*).

Dorilant, moreover, that is mistakenly addressed as *Dick*, is funnily urged by Harcourt (Belville's uncle in Garrick's version) to kiss Margery. It goes without saying that such a piece of advice, that was fitting for a bashful and inexperienced youth, is redundant in the case of a notorious libertine, such as Dorilant.

But the lack of revision inadvertently leads to still more ludicrous lines, such as Harcourt's sincere remark on Belville's modesty when he is left alone with Peggy in the park. He tells Moody: "My dear friend is a very modest young man, you may depend upon his prudence". These words can only produce a hilarious effect when applied to Dorilant, who does pose a real danger to his honour. What in Garrick's play helped tighten up the structure of the piece, by bringing together both plots, in Lee's version only leads to confusion as the result of that lack of revision. Lee inserts the park scene into his play at a point when Harcourt and Alithea aren't still acquainted with each other's feelings. It is therefore puzzling to hear Alithea tell Harcourt that their relationship has come to an end when the audience hasn't seen it even start: "I will never see you more. I will get rid of your importunities and give my hand to Sparkish tomorrow morning".

The careless revision of Lee's version clearly explains why it left the stage for ever the following year. Garrick's adaptation, which had further purified the scarce instances of double-entendre that it originally contained<sup>61</sup> fittingly answered all the requirements of its audience: purity of language, morality, verosimilitude, clarity of plot and romantic tone of its ending.

Wycherley's lively wit had been irretrievably "murdered for the audience on stage"<sup>62</sup>.

<sup>61</sup> Such as Alithea's ambiguous use of "something" when she tells Moody that Belville "has only gone with the young gentleman [Peggy in disguise] to see *something*", and Moody replies: "*Something*, See *something*!".

<sup>62</sup> This situation would remain unchanged until the early decades of the twentieth century, when the Phoenix Society's revival of Wycherley's *The Country Wife* in 1924 started the rediscovery of the play's rich dramatic possibilities.

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On stage they were ridiculed, portrayed as mercenary hypocrites bent upon spoiling innocent fleshly pleasures. There was no concept of a "fourth wall", which made the relationship between players and audience electrifying at times. Audiences adored the simple technique of the "aside", where characters addressed them directly, taking them into their confidence. They preferred predictable plots and exaggerated stereotypes. When disgruntled with a particular play, audiences sometimes became so rowdy that they could close a production down. Engraved plate from The Devils Cabinet-Council with Oliv... Towards the end of the century, new ideas emerged about the position of women in marriage.