

Asides and Audience Participation in Restoration Theatre

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In his book *Theatrical Convention and Audience Response in Early Modern Drama*, Scholar Jeremy Lopez argues that theatrical asides are “one of the most potentially disruptive” (56) theatrical conventions in English drama because “all asides impinge on an audience’s focus to a certain degree” (57). He worries that “the audience may begin to concentrate on the artifice of the theatre” (63) when other actors on stage stop what they’re doing and physically freeze, ignoring what another actor is saying while delivering an aside directly to the audience. Enhancing this problem, he argues, is the fact that many asides are unmarked in the published texts by the bracketed, italicized stage direction “(Aside)” — perhaps purposely left out by playwrights, who felt that stage directions were unnecessary. Whether they are marked or not, asides deserve a separate analysis from the rest of the play. Are they a kind of paratext? Gerard Genette, who coined the term, argues that a text “rarely appears in its naked state, without the reinforcement... [of things] “like an author’s name, a title, a preface, (or) illustrations” (261). More useful to us here in a modern-day discussion of theatrical asides, however, is his description of a paratext as “‘an undecided zone’ between the inside and the outside, itself without rigorous limits” (261). Clearly asides are part of the written dialogue of a play, created by the playwright, which suggests that they are not paratextual; rather simply text. However, because they stop the action of the play and break what is now called ‘the fourth wall,’ communicating directly with the audience, should they be considered different from a play’s regular textual content? Are they more similar to a paratextual prologue or epilogue? I will argue that asides reside somewhere between the play and the paratext that surrounds it, and that the Restoration-era audience and their

reaction to asides also has a role to play in determining their meaning, both then and now.

Actor and writer Simon Callow explains that when an actor in a Restoration comedy is faced with an aside, they are taught that they always are telling a truth and that they are to deliver the aside as though they were speaking to their peers (66). This builds complicity and connection with the audience—and if it is a comedic play, through shared laughter. For example, when Miranda, a beautiful girl whose older guardian Sir Francis is attempting to court her (and her inheritance) in Susanna Centlivre's play *The Busie Body*, she acts outwardly sweet to him, keen to stay on his good side, by delivering dialogue like "...methinks there's no body handsomer than you..." (2.1) —only to turn to the audience in an aside a few lines later and say about Sir Francis: "Unconscionable old wretch, bribe me with my own money" (2.1). Miranda delivers several asides like this in an early scene, all mocking her guardian, as she addresses the audience directly. The effect is immediate: the asides make the audience laugh, make Sir Francis look like a fool, and put us firmly on Miranda's side throughout the rest of the play. The audience becomes her fast friend because she is telling the truth to us instead of to Sir Francis.

In tragic plays, asides can build connections by revealing emotional feelings directly to the audience. In *The London Merchant*, for example, the audience very quickly gets to know the character of Barnwell through three asides in the first act that reveal his immediate attraction to the scheming character Millwood; the final aside in this scene blatantly telling the audience his feelings for her, saying "How strange, and yet how kind, her words and actions are! And the effect they have on me is as strange.—I feel desires I never knew before" (1.5). Playwright George Lillo, creating a play out of an existing story already well known to the audience through the "Ballad of George Barnwell," needs to establish the Barnwell character's attraction to Millwood early on in the

script because it is the reason for the remainder of the plot—a theft, a cover up, a murder, and a conviction. Having the audience learn about his feelings through these asides helps show that attraction more quickly than a prolonged, flirtatious dialogue would, allowing the plot to move forward faster. But asides become useful for more than simply conveying speedy emotion as the play progresses and as the betrayals Barnwell becomes guilty of in each of his relationships unfolds along with the plot. Barnwell becomes unable to discuss the things he's done with any of the other characters through regular dialogue because he's harbouring so many secrets, so asides and soliloquies delivered directly to the audience become a necessary way for them to know what he is feeling. And although Barnwell has done various awful things—including murdering his uncle—the audience can sympathize and identify with him because of the direct, confessional tone his asides take.

Another scholar, Dawn Lewcock, describes asides as a way for actors to “‘converse’ with the audience”(1) rather than perform for them. Lewcock adds to Callow’s idea of how an actor should handle an aside by quoting 20th century Shakespearean actor Baliol Holloway:

An aside must be directed to a given seat in the theatre—a different seat for each aside... Never to the same seat twice—the rest of the audience will think you have a friend sitting there. If you are facing to the right immediately before the aside, then direct it to the left of the theatre, and vice versa. Your head must crack round in one clean movement, look straight at the occupant of the seat, deliver the line, and crack your head back to exactly where it was before. The voice you use must be different from the one you are using in the play.... During an aside, no other characters must move at all—the time you take does not exist for them. (12)

This description flirts with the notion of the ‘separateness’ of asides. They are described as a conversation with the audience rather than a performance. All other action on stage stops while the actors are speaking them. Different voices are used. The layer of ‘remove’ suggested in seeing this kind of behaviour by an

actor supports the idea of an aside being considered a kind of paratext inserted in the middle of the text itself.

Although asides were inserted into the middle of the text, they weren't necessarily delivered from the middle of the stage, but often from the "forestage [area], projecting into the auditorium" (Lewcock, 2). Lewcock points out that "with the use of scenery... the manner of projecting ... the aside could be more carefully... positioned in relation to the audience and to the other actors on the stage" (19). Special staging uniquely designed for asides that places actors closer to their confidantes in the audience supports the idea that asides are a separate paratextual element within the play too, although this argument can be problematic because as Lopez argues, "most 'asides' as we know them in these plays are at least partly modern editorial constructs" (59). Judith Fisher's research on Restoration theatre illustrates how audiences responded to asides before the practice was outlawed by David Garrick in 1762. Some plays had to endure members of the audience being seated both behind and to the side of the players on the stage itself, to accommodate demand and for the play to be profitable. As disruptive as their simple presence on stage could be, the entire audience took it a step further by voicing their pleasure or displeasure with what they were seeing on stage by "full scale rioting and pelting the stage with fruit" or "cheering so loudly that, even if a performance were not brought to a halt, the actors could not be heard" (Fisher 56). Actors therefore had to navigate changes to their delivery of dialogue in addition to their entrances and exits under these challenging circumstances. If stage directions that were related to actors accommodating the audience were written, then they likely would not have applied to future productions, and could consequently be left out or lost in future versions of the play. This idea discredits Lopez's argument that playwrights simply "did not take the time" (60) to write in the stage directions. Even if stage directions were not removed due to seating and staging in specific productions, they may have been removed by later publishers due to confusion; a modern database of

stage directions compiled by scholars from 500 original printed texts from a similar era include the now-bewildering stage directions 'make a leg,' or 'hair about her ears.' Obscure stage directions like this are a unique kind of paratext themselves. If they somehow could be reinstated now, it would further our understanding of what playwrights may have intended when they wrote asides—but even if we could access this information, we cannot know a playwright's full intent. As D.F. McKenzie writes: "The dramatic text is not only notoriously unstable, but whatever the script, it is again never more than a pre-text for the theatrical occasion" (50).

Despite the instability of what we can fully know about Restoration plays, research points to the creation of a kind of intimacy between the players and the audience—both emotionally, when they are drawn in with an aside delivered by an actor facing them, and physically, by physical closeness with the actors themselves. In this way, Lewcock describes how the audience could consider themselves as a participant in a conversation, rather than as a detached audience member. With audiences aware of past roles actors had played, playwrights would purposely include some of these characteristics into the current characters they would write for these well-known actors to take advantage of their existing persona. In *The Busie Body*, for example, there is a series of asides delivered by the characters Isabinda and Patch that might have meant more to a Restoration audience than a modern one. (As there is limited knowledge of the actresses who played these characters, what follows is just my speculation of how there could be a layering of wit.) In one scene, Isabinda and Patch are asked to sing and play music while Isabinda's lover is hidden in the closet. Were he to come out, the circumstances would be dire, as they are unmarried. If we read their asides as straight dialogue, we can see that both of them are terribly, comedically, nervous, one not wanting to sing by claiming to be out of tune, the other hoping to sing so well she will distract everyone from noticing her lover if he comes out. But we could also read the asides differently: what if these two actresses had sung in previous plays? Perhaps badly? Audiences would have

been familiar with the performers' singing prowess (or lack thereof) in previous plays, so it could add to the humour if it was hinted at in a new play. This would appeal to the audience's relished role as a confidante being in on the joke. Interestingly, the play's footnote about the song does not specify the title of the song Patch and Isabinda do eventually perform, badly, later in the scene—the title of the song is lost. Perhaps it was purposely left unspoken in any stage directions so that a different song could be used at different productions of the play, to keep it relevant and to add an additional, personal level of humour based on which actresses were playing the roles or what they were known for.

Audiences were known to be well versed in actors' personal lives in addition to knowing about their previous roles. With only two theatres in London and limited performers available for productions, actors were used repeatedly and were memorable to playgoers for both their acting skills and the growing gossip that surrounded them. Both playwrights and people that wrote prologues or epilogues for plays (as they were sometimes authored separately) would occasionally play cheekily on this personal information to get a laugh. When actress Susanna Maria Cibber stepped onstage still dressed as the tragic character Maria to deliver a strangely saucy epilogue at the end of the tragic play *The London Merchant*, audience members knew that in real life she was married to the actor Theophilus Cibber who had just played the character of Barnwell, and that his character, who'd just died, had been the object of her character's tragically unrequited love. The audience viewed a person inhabiting a combination of both her character and her public persona's qualities addressing them directly about her immediate, flirty search for a new love. These opening lines, therefore, would feel like an inside joke—but one that everyone understands:

Since fate has robb'd me of the hapless youth
 For whom my heart had hoarded up its truth
 By all the laws of love and hour, now,
 I'm free again to chuse—and one of you. (Cibber, epilogue)

The audience, in this burgeoning age of celebrity, enjoyed the joke they saw in her quick change of heart. They likely further knew that the epilogue had been written by her father-in-law Colley Cibber (as he was a famous actor, playwright, and theatre manager), and were perhaps even also aware that he originally had not approved of her marriage to his son, which added another layer of humour to the epilogue, because she seems like she is not too 'choosy'—she's hinting that someone in the audience will do as a new mate. A potential third scenario (depending on the year of the performance), would be that the audience had heard the gossip about her and her husband's rumoured ménage à trois with another gentleman named William Sloper. Jokes that knit together this kind of information from a performer's character and life have the potential for double or triple entendre, and this layering of the fictional and the personal made the audiences participants in the jest. As Lewcock argues, this adds "to... (the audience's) appreciation and enjoyment of the play, and incline(s) them to feel they are participating in a social occasion amongst their friends and acquaintances" (22). Scholar Diana Solomon describes how the performer of an eighteenth-century epilogue's "character and persona coexisted but formed a third figure that inhabited... a state of 'betweenness'" (156). It is because they occupy this indistinct place in the text—where an actor is both playing a character and perhaps not really playing a character at all—that asides can be considered paratextual. Indeed, Lewcock writes that "undoubtedly there are many allusions in the plays, now lost to us, where the actors' personal relationships made their casting more piquant for the contemporary audience," and also "at times it must have seemed to the audience that an actor delivering an aside would be stepping out of character and speaking virtually as himself" (21).

The point can be made, therefore, that if audiences are almost entering a kind of conversation with the performers onstage, asides delivered directly at them were not as disruptive and problematic as Lopez considers them to be. More distracting perhaps, was the need for the audience to accept other

theatrical conventions, such as the non-naturalistic style of acting performers were coached to use:

Walking or standing on the stage may seem to the layman to require no training, but to the acting student this often proves the most difficult lesson to master..... mannerisms... included the mincing steps, later known as the stage "strut," the typical stance with chest thrust forward and hips back, (and) the prescribed elegancies of the curtsy and the bow." (Hunt 452-453)

In addition to learning these stylized poses like the right way to sit in a chair and the right way to enter through a door, actors were taught to use specific acting gestures while delivering their lines, such as pointing to one's heart to indicate passion, or pointing to one's head to indicate reason. They also needed to learn musical speech for the stage because the norm was to use different vocal tones for love, hate, heroism, and sadness (Hunt, 453). Surely these artificial acting conventions taxed the audience's attention to some degree, who needed to interpret the actions as well as the quick, quippy dialogue. Furthermore, audiences were expected to suspend their disbelief for staging technicalities. As Lewcock explains, "A curtain was hung at the rear of the forestage which was drawn up at the beginning of a performance and stayed up ...so that every scene change took place in view of the audience" (2). Lighting, too, required the audience to accept its shortcomings: very bright light for the stage was provided by candles centred in a ring above both the stage and the audience—so both were lit the same (Nicholl 465). And when, for example, darkness was called for on stage, performers would have to indicate darkness through tiptoeing, wearing nightgowns, or groping as though they could not see, all requiring "the imaginative participation...of the playgoer" (Desen & Thomson 14). While all of this was happening on the stage, there was plenty of distracting action taking place off stage as well:

...quarrels and disturbances sometimes made the pit a noisy place and disrupted the play. People from all different socio-economic levels attended Restoration era plays, so the audience was made up

of servants and dukes, as well all levels in between. So the 'orangewomen' bargained for their goods and charms (in the audience) not only in the intervals but sometimes during the action on the stage. (Avery & Scouten 463)

One might imagine that rather than being distracted by an actor delivering an aside, the pause could be a welcome reprieve from the multitude of other activities that were competing for the Restoration audience's attention, intentionally or otherwise. Considering the potential storm of activity that could occur both onstage and off during a Restoration play, it seems implausible that asides "frequently... had the potential to irritate or confuse their original audiences," (59) as Lopez suggests.

It's worthwhile to take this argument of asides as paratext one step further and consider the role of the audience as a kind of paratext too. Strictly speaking, their role wasn't textually included in written publications, the way stage directions may (or may not) have been, but nevertheless, Fisher convincingly argues that the Restoration audience played a big part in these plays:

Everybody expected the audience to participate, whether physically, vocally or emotionally. Indeed writers, managers, and performers were so used to the audience ensuring that they were involved that their participation was taken more for granted than recorded as an unusual event. (57)

They regularly requested certain speeches they liked to be repeated up to four times in a row!

This level of audience involvement was not to last, however. When David Garrick made a change to theatre illumination in 1765, providing reflectors that lit the back portions of the stage more, actors tended to move back away from the forestage, and consequently away from the audience (Nicholl 466). These technical changes, which eventually led to our current style of theatre where the audience sits together in the dark watching a fully illuminated performance onstage, had an effect on the audience's involvement, turning them into passive

consumers instead of engaged participants. Fisher writes, somewhat lamentingly, “the darkened auditorium has completely separated the players from their patrons and overt public displays of emotion in the theatre are no longer commonplace. Human emotions have not changed, but theatrical tradition regarding audience behaviour and dramatic presentations has” (66). Granted, there are current kinds of performance where the patrons are invited to vote or comment—during an improvisational comedy show, or the growing popularity of a ‘talk-back’ with actors after a play, for example—where there are glimpses of an actor/audience connection and which suggest that the involvement of the ‘house’ never entirely disappeared, or perhaps a desire to resurrect it. Interestingly, recent research by neuroscientists at University College London has studied the emotions of theatregoers, and their findings seem to support what Fisher has to say. Their study, measuring heart rates and skin responses of audience members during a recent production of the musical *Dreamgirls*, found that the audiences heartbeats responded to the show in unison, speeding up and slowing down at the same rate as each other, which, they argued, breaks down social differences and brings people together. It is tempting to consider the rising and falling heart rates of a Restoration era audience, so close to and so heavily invested in the player-celebrities they were watching and interacting with while cheering or booing what was happening onstage. Under these close, emotional conditions, we can argue that a Restoration era audience may have turned into a kind of character itself, inhabiting space just outside the text. If asides were an opportunity for an actor to take a step slightly out of their character and out of a scene towards the audience, then perhaps at the same moment the audience could choose to step into that shared liminal space as a participant, into that ‘threshold’ between spaces that Genette was talking about when he coined the term paratext.

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