



PROJECT MUSE®

Staging Governance

O'Quinn, Daniel

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

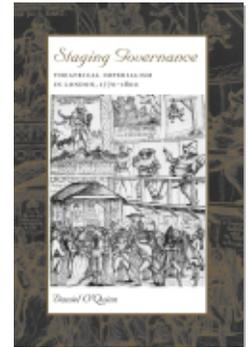
O'Quinn, Daniel.

Staging Governance: Theatrical Imperialism in London, 1770–1800.

Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.

Project MUSE., <a href="

<https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/60320>

Access provided at 22 Oct 2019 02:49 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

PART

ONE

Ethnographic Acts

SITTING IN ONE'S SEAT with family and friends, milling about the lobby and pit, or standing in the upper balconies, the theatregoer of the late eighteenth century was engaged above all in a complex mode of sociability whose political and cultural importance has been consistently undervalued and underexamined. This neglect is largely a result of the strength of arguments regarding the public sphere initiated by Jürgen Habermas and modified by a legion of scholars specializing in eighteenth century and romantic print culture. The heuristic value of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is beyond doubt, but recent work on questions of sociability have emphasized critical blind spots in the largely heteronormative accounts of how the citizen-subject emerged through the cultivation of “audience-oriented privacy” and the “codification of intimacy” in genres such as the letter, the diary, and the novel.¹ As Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite have argued, sociability is often defined as a form of social interaction that exists for its own sake and is thus removed not only from the political power of the state but also from the rational communality of civil society.² This exclusion of a whole swath of social interaction from the purview of social theory rests on an analysis of the theatricality of sociability that understands social performance either as free play or the provenance of self-representation.³ However, theorists of performance from a host of disciplines have demonstrated that because social performance always already incorporates history, it cannot be easily dispensed with. Judith Butler makes this abundantly clear when she argues “that performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that ‘performance’ is not a singular ‘act’ or event, but a ritualized production.”⁴ The complex temporality of Butler’s thesis should give us pause, for it implies that the subject is preceded by social norms, enacting and modifying them all in the same moment. In the moment of social performativity, the history and future of social relations are in a state of nonlinear negotiation whose outcome is not easy to specify. That specification requires careful attention to the historicity of performance itself.

But that historicity, as Joseph Roach has demonstrated in his analysis of performative surrogation in circum-Atlantic culture, often works through chaotic mechanisms, some of which generate flows of great cultural significance and some of which amount to little beyond themselves.⁵ Significance in this context is largely a result of what remains culturally and socially operative—for example, much of the literary scholarship on

eighteenth-century British imperialism is deformed by nineteenth-century understandings of race. This deformation, which has been recently anatomized by Roxann Wheeler, testifies not only to the continuing effectivity of racial categorization as a means of social control, but also to the necessity of paying attention to historical assemblages that became obsolete or occluded.⁶ The emergence of social formations is often made possible by events, actions, and dispositions that have no place in the future, except as the hidden, but constitutive, past. Social performance, by virtue of its very messiness, offers a rich field for the genealogist, and theatrical sociability, by virtue of the interplay between representation and enactment, remains a locus from which to supplement and reevaluate the often static accounts of public and private generated by scholars of print culture. Paradoxically, scholarship on sociability and performance may provide a useful counter-memory from which to refine, reconfigure, or even challenge accounts of late eighteenth-century public spheres.

In perhaps the most clear tabulation of modes of sociability in eighteenth-century Britain, Peter Clark describes social interaction in the Georgian period as “an intricate tessellation” of “private” sociability of the home, of an “old style” sociability based around the church, Parliament, court, and the street, and of a “new style” sociability brought on by the commercialization of culture.⁷ In spite of the fact that this new style of sociability took place in venues such as the theatres, pleasure gardens, shops, and dancing assemblies, Clark’s analysis models this “new style” on the male homosexual environments of the coffeehouse and the club.⁸ Russell and Tuite have gone some distance in rectifying the limiting view of sociability inherent in this methodological decision, but I wish to retain the notion of style because it allows us to think about the myriad social practices that might converge on any given evening in the theatre as a question of style and thus susceptible to both historical and rhetorical reading.

As an audience and a set of players congregated, a range of styles and counterstyles of individual self-representation and social exchange unfolded both in relation to the entertainment on stage and in relation to the entertainment inherent to sociality itself. What this implies is that the audience was engaged in moral and aesthetic judgments about their own constitution and practice of sociability. Because the theatre audience incorporated men and women, residents of the Town, the City, and the Country, fashionable, commercial and more common spectators, and a host of ethnically distinct subjects, the social practices housed within the walls of Covent Garden or Drury Lane amounted to a rather less-exalted form of “spectatorial ethics” than perhaps Adam Smith had in mind.⁹ And

yet, exalted or not, what audiences were doing at this historical juncture cannot be separated from the consideration of modes of behavior and everyday life that were the subject of print journalism, philosophical disquisition, and theatrical representation. What is peculiar about the theatre in this regard, which separates it from the more conventionally defined venues of the bourgeois public sphere, is that mutually constitutive acts of ethical spectatorship and ethical enactment occur in a tight temporal loop. Without the delay inherent to the print media, this kind of sociability involves a level of volatility that is perhaps unparalleled in the period.

I have introduced the notion of “ethical spectatorship” advisedly because the imperative behind Smith’s invocation of the “impartial spectator” recognizes that such spectatorship of the social has economic and political value.¹⁰ Like many forms of Enlightenment, Smith’s particularly visual metaphorization of social inquiry plays a complex role in the mediation of social change—in its representation and evaluation. This is nowhere more evident than in the practice of Enlightenment ethnography and natural history. As the commercial range of the European empires expanded in the eighteenth century, it became economically necessary to develop modes of sociability between highly divergent societies. Thus, understanding “human nature” became important not only for establishing the moral duties of citizen-subjects of Britain to each other and to themselves, but also for navigating the social interface with non-Britons in order to further the commercial aims of the empire’s charter companies. As Kathleen Wilson has reminded us, “dividing the human species up into nations was arguably the most widely used category of difference in the period, and nation served to map, literally and metaphorically, the moral, philosophical, theological and historical debates over human diversity, human nature, and the impact of climate, government, language and laws on both.”¹¹ With a largely racial understanding of the term nation, one could argue that one of the ubiquitous projects of the period was to incorporate the often contradictory evidence brought back to the metropole by explorers, merchants, and less-interested observers into emerging theories of human nature and sociality. This is most evident in the difficult assimilation of information gathered during the Cook voyages for as often as not the incoming empirical information diverged considerably from the abstract categories devised by philosophers and protoanthropologists.¹² Under the pressure of an ever-expanding repertoire of human diversity, eighteenth-century ethnography was forced into increasingly reductive and abstract levels of distinction.

Because the social and cultural mapping of the world by Enlightenment

thinkers has been widely discussed, two issues need reinterpretation here.¹³ Whether the models of racial and national diversity were based on polygenetic accounts, as in those based on the pre-Adamite theory of Isaac la Peyrère, or on the more-pervasive monogenetic accounts of Buffon, Montesquieu, Blumenbach, and Kames, these protoethnographic texts carry a governmental imperative.¹⁴ The gradation of varieties of mankind was inevitably incorporated into a linear pattern of human progress. With “Caucasians” (Blumenbach’s term) placed in preeminent position, the rest of the world’s peoples were categorized by their proximity or distance from this normative example. Aside from allowing for a refinement of the Great Chain of Being, which could establish the relative maturity of societies and thus their susceptibility to rule, both monogenetic and polygenetic accounts of difference quickly incorporated notions of degeneracy.¹⁵ Whether it was due to the influence of climate, intermarriage, or simply conduct, one could argue that societies, which should by “nature” be more advanced, were caught in a regressive slide. This type of argument was used not only to suggest that residents of the tropics were inevitably held back by the influence of climate but also that members of more “advanced” societies would also lose their physical and mental vigor if subject to similar environmental factors.

Regardless of the projected origins of difference or the wide range of possible factors that ostensibly segmented mankind, what remains most important in this period of vague racializations is the assumption of a natural humanity that acts as a norm against which various manifestations of human variety will be valued and judged. In Britain, this natural humanity was grounded not on physiological difference but rather on what was described by a wide range of commentators as “natural liberty,” a point elaborated by Sudipta Sen:

The authoritarian family and the authoritarian nation-state were both results of a profound search for order in a world of rapid material change and uncertainty. The anxieties of disorder that were reflected in the current doctrines of political economy also generated two inviolable and mutually dependent qualities in the conception of the civilized state of nations: liberty and property. In the age of British expansion, native populations brought under ethnological scrutiny were inevitably defined by the lack of these qualities. It was considered perfectly reasonable, for instance, to claim and annex territory where there were no “natural inhabitants,” or inhabitants endowed with natural liberties.¹⁶

This meant that British forms of juridical governance and British understandings of property became the norm against which other cultures and societies were judged. In the absence of a recognizable sovereign government, as often happened in the case of North America, British merchants or soldiers would either declare their own sovereignty or abruptly nominate someone sovereign and deal with that leader as though operating according to modes of governance endemic to England.

In the case of the more recognizably organized social structure of India, British functionaries reconstructed indigenous modes of governance in terms of European political institutions and operated—at least nominally—according to codes of international law and alliance. These conscious misrecognitions played a strategic role in not only enabling but also veiling British rule. As Thomas Pownall explicitly recognized as early as 1773,

Although the sovereignty of the native Government of the country within the bounds of the dominion of the East India Company is abolished and annihilated, yet the forms and orders, the offices, and ostensible officers of Government remain—the tenure of the lands remains as it did; the rents and revenues as they did;—the state of rights personal and political, the rule of government, such as they were; the sovereign power and direction however, the absolute military command, the absolute perpetuity of right in the revenues . . . is held under a very jealous and exclusive power in the hands of the Company: although it suffers the government to be exercised by the nominal officers of the state—yet it is the holder of the state in its own hands.¹⁷

This form of veiled sovereignty in which now obsolete or compliant potentates were accorded the status of nominal rulers and in which indigenous governmental practices were retained was of crucial strategic importance in India, for it lent legitimacy to a rather dubious form of domination.¹⁸ But the fact that Britons felt the need to legitimize their governmental practices is itself notable, for it emerged in part from the fantasy of British governmental preeminence and in part from the very real, if rarely articulated, sense that their hold on power was tenuous. The precise ratio of arrogance to anxiety shifted back and forth during the late eighteenth century until the final military victories over the sultans of Mysore and the Marathas squelched organized resistance and paved the way for the Charter Act of 1813, which asserted the Crown's "undoubted sovereignty" over all of the company's territories.

Because it carried the burden of legitimation, much of the ethnographic writing of this period focuses on the relationship between native peoples and the mutually constitutive notions of governance and property. Regions as culturally diverse as Africa, North America, India, Scotland, and Ireland became the object of an emergent ethnographic imagination whose primary objective was to provide an alibi for colonial rule. Thus nations were characterized either as naturally subservient or unfit to govern themselves, as always already enslaved or hopelessly prone to despotism. These characterizations often came in pairs. For example, Robert Orme, in his extremely influential *Historical Fragments of the Mogul Empire and the Morattoes and of the English Concerns in Indostan*, offered one of the earliest ethnographic accounts in which “the natural history of Indians is directly implicated with the project of imperial dominion.”¹⁹ Orme divides India into the subservient, effeminate Hindu population and the ruling martial Mogul society and attaches these qualities to various physical features and modes of conduct. As Sen notes, this “initial dichotomy of the subject population, marked by the opposing attributes of domestic and unruly, settled and nomadic, effeminate and martial, can be seen in other parts of the colonial world as well” including in the distinction between Ireland and Scotland.²⁰ On either side of these dichotomies, the subject population is portrayed as having no conception of property or as having been corrupted by despotic rule such that any sense of liberty or property has degenerated beyond reclamation. Subservience therefore is either natural or the result of historical degeneration. In the former category, we have the fantasy of Friday from *Robinson Crusoe* or the natives of Otaheite in the various treatments of Cook’s first voyage to the South Seas. As we will see in our discussion of Louthembourg’s production of *Omai; or, A Trip Round the World*, the question of the Tahitian relation to property is of critical importance for the adjudication of British sovereignty. In the latter category, we have the myriad fantasies of Oriental despotism whether culled from the pages of Oriental tales or projected onto the principalities of India.

In this way, in the words of Uday Mehta, the British Empire became a mirror of British political thought.²¹ This is not to say that British institutions were simply transposed or transplanted, but rather that the empire became a place where the nature of appropriate governance and the nature of property were put into question. As Sen argues, liberty and landed property were at the heart of Whig principles of governance and political economy:

The faith in individual liberty was generated no doubt, through a profound historical relationship between property, patrimony, and patriarchal authority within the household. Many of these ideas were enshrined in legislation that reflected the intimate connections between liberty, private property, and law. By the eighteenth century, the gentry household had acquired a much sharper definition with the gradual decline of a wider clientage: retainers, servants, and tenants. The new patriarchal family was founded on a close adherence to property and the reinforcement of paternal authority.²²

That both liberty and property were literally and metaphorically tied to paternal notions of the landed family is important, because as the households of Britain changed so too did the faith that secured the colonial conception of rule. The corollary of ethnographic arguments such as Orme's that subject populations are destined to subservience is that the ruling constituency must protect itself from degeneration. In the nineteenth century, that meant that a strict separation was enforced between ruler and ruled, but in the late eighteenth century things were much less clear. As William Dalrymple and others have recently demonstrated, the everyday social and economic lives of East India Company functionaries and of the Indians who traded with or served them were deeply intertwined.²³ The legacy of this intimate interaction throughout this period would have a significant impact on the largely segregationist social policy in the nineteenth century. In the period preceding the Permanent Settlement, however, one can discern not only the existence of arguments both for and against different levels of cultural, social, and legal integration but also a set of arguments that firmly locate the contaminating effects of colonial service in India in the prior social deterioration of the metropole.²⁴

John Brewer has argued that the midcentury saw the crystallization of the gentry's "natural tendency" to rule.²⁵ Like the "natural liberty" of colonial emissaries, however, that "natural tendency" was susceptible to degeneration. By the 1770s the political efficacy of the gentry was called into question by the economic crises generated by colonial speculation, by a breakdown in the system of credit, and by increasing pressure on the paternal structure of the aristocracy. As the middle ranks became more skeptical about both the solvency of landed property and increasingly convinced by charges of dissipation and corruption, one can chart increasing anxiety about both liberty and property. Significantly, the same symptomatology used to derogate colonized societies was deployed in the diagnosis of British cultural and social degeneration. Chief among these signs

was effeminacy, and in this context gender insubordination became a sign of a breakdown both in the gentry's manifestation of "natural liberty" and in the property relations that ostensibly guaranteed their economic interest in the health of the nation. Perhaps a no-less-important set of signs was associated with despotism—cruelty, volatility, deceit, and sexual dissipation. These signs all pertain to forms of errant masculinity that proliferated in a wide range of discourses, representations, and performances.

This proliferation is critical because it returns us to the question of sociability in the theatre. Because gender plays such a crucial role both in the ethnographic project required for the legitimization of colonial governance and in the autoethnographic project of evaluating the state of British society at any given time, the dialectical relation between the representation of sociality on stage and the performance of sociability in the audience is evident in the sexual economy through which social exchange operates in the theatre. As Kristina Straub has persuasively demonstrated, the eighteenth-century theatre was a kind of laboratory for testing and analyzing sometimes subtle, sometimes violent transformations in the sex/gender system.²⁶ This was especially the case with regard to the representation of the family, of effeminacy, and of violent masculinity, for all three of these concerns were figuratively and literally tied not only to the threatened security of the governmental fantasy of landed property, but also to the emergent discourse of political economy that would provide the discursive integration of governmental, economic, and social institutions required for the legitimization of middle-class ascendancy. The family, of course, changes its function in this transformation from that of a figure for governance in which the sovereign state is understood as a hierarchical relationship between patriarchal ruler and subject-children to that of an assemblage that retains the former figurative connotations but supplements them with actual sexual deployments. While these transformations suffuse all social relations, the theatre's strange negotiation of intimacy and publicity makes it an illuminating venue for examining the dubiously "ethical" spectatorship endemic to its autoethnographic function.

Thus intimate signs and practices became indicators of macrological tendencies pertaining to the success of the nation and the empire in "the right disposition of things."²⁷ When a power vacuum emerged due to a decline in the landed gentry's capacity for rule, the commercial classes, whose power was based less on property than on contract, not only found itself compelled to rule but also exercised forms of governmental function not yet prescribed by the conventional juridical manifestations of landed

power defined by the British Constitution. Like the East India Company's practice of legitimizing its institutional power by ceding nominal territorial rule to those who no longer have it, the middle classes developed complex forms of self-legitimation that retained the nominal structure of a now mystified Constitution, but which exercised power in a supplemental fashion through the institutional control of intimate practices generally deemed below the purview of sovereign government. This is the problematic addressed by Samuel Foote's *The Nabob*, to which we now turn.