Theater Figures

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Conclusion

I have argued that theater provided nineteenth-century novels, novelists, and critics with a generic figure that allowed them to position particular novels and novelistic genres within a complex literary field of competing forms and agendas. Novel genres high and low, male and female, public and private, realistic and romantic, all came to identify themselves (and to disidentify with others) within a set of coordinates that included—if only for the purpose of exclusion—the spectacular figure of theater. This figure likewise provided a trope around and against which to construct images of readers and authors—images that most frequently worked to mediate between the supposedly private acts of reading and writing and the very public facts of the print market. Changes in the literary market—which is to say, changes in habits of consumption and modes of production—drove and were driven by concomitant shifts in novelistic, authorial, and readerly identities, and I have tried to describe these changes at (and on) various stages. My point throughout has been not only that theater appears as figure in novels of the nineteenth century, but also that theater figures—actively and importantly—in what we have come to look back on as the history of the nineteenth-century novel. In my focus on novelistic production, in the theatrical and economic sense of that term, I have attempted to show that theater plays a constitutive role in the makeup of literary character (in all senses of the term).
I would like to look at a final figure, foppish and rotund as it proudly struts its way across the cover of this book and across the 1895 cover of the prospectus for *The Savoy*. Everything about this figure is decidedly full—from its protuberant belly to its play of national, gendered, and generic signifiers. The story of its composition in fact reads like a parable of the function of theatrical figure in the nineteenth-century literary imagination. Asked to provide a cover design for the prospectus of a new, avant-garde literary quarterly to which he had been appointed art editor, Aubrey Beardsley delivered an image of a winged Pierrot crossing a curtained stage. The publisher of *The Savoy*, pornographic bookseller Leonard Smithers, found this pantomime figure too “flippant” to symbolize the high literary aims of the magazine that he hoped would rival *The Yellow Book*. He asked Beardsley for another drawing, claiming that “John Bull,” which is to say the English reading public, needed a more “serious” (and less French?) image (Snodgrass, 155). Beardsley responded not only with an image for John Bull but also of him. In the second prospectus design, the characteristic figure for England and the English replaces Pierrot on the front stage of *The Savoy*, looking every bit as flippant and theatrical as the previous clown (see figure 6). Smithers, however, was apparently delighted with the design and began to circulate the prospectus—until Savoy contributor George Moore noticed the outline of a tiny, erect penis in John Bull’s trousers. Moore, that champion of free speech and denouncer of the “domestic Index Expurgatorius,” immediately called in the censors. Meeting with a group of literary men and prospective *Savoy* contributors—including George Bernard Shaw, Edgar Jepson, Alexander Teixeira de Mattos, Herbert Horne, and Selwyn Image—Moore demanded that something be done about the image. A delegation from the meeting went to Smithers’s office to insist that Beardsley remove what Shaw called the “subtle stroke that emphasized the virility of John” (Weintraub, 156) and Smithers complied—perhaps because, as Weintraub suggests, he had nothing to lose: almost all 80,000 copies of the prospectus had already been released (156). Beardsley removed the offending stroke, and the altered drawing (“John Bull in a more tepid temper” [Jepson, 287]) appeared on the contents page of the first number of the magazine (see figure 7).

Although this is ostensibly a story about a penis—albeit a very tiny one—I take it to be a story about the literary phallus, in all of its symbolic potency. While I find it admittedly hilarious that these male literati held a secret meeting to discuss the small matter of John Bull’s excited profile, I also think that there was more to dislike about the image than the offending member, for Beardsley’s ridiculous John Bull is also an image of authorship—of male
authorship made theatrical and ridiculous. With his giant pens and his miniscule penis, this John Bull is both a parodic literalization of the link between masculinity and authorship best characterized by Flaubert’s self-description as “un homme-plume” (VanderWolk, 148) and the nightmare realization of spectacular authorship in all of its commodified fleshiness: here is the author as cheap showman and as performing showpiece. In what must have seemed to Moore like a horrifying reversal of the authorial gaze, the author himself becomes the production, and Beardsley gives him an appreciative audience. From below the theatrical curtain, a small child returns the viewer’s gaze as s/he peeks laughingly out, delighted by this emperor’s new clothes. Indeed, this staging of authorial power and satisfaction as the spectacle of ridiculous self-absorption functions (much like the popular fairy tale) to expose and deflate claims to grandeur. No wonder Moore and company were enraged: by mocking the pompous masculinity of the authorial persona, Beardsley
unveiled it as the very thing it had defined itself against—feminized spectacle. In their insistence that Beardsley clean up his act, this band of literary brothers (led in their assault on Smithers by Shaw, the “fighting man in chief” [Shaw, 572]) struck a blow for authorial virility by—as Freud might have it—castrating castration (“Medusa’s Head,” 273–74).

Heard in the battle over *The Savoy*’s prospectus are echoes of previous skirmishes over the gender, space, and function of literature. The desire to elevate *The Savoy*—to ensure its status as “a periodical of an exclusively literary and artistic kind,” as literary editor Arthur Symons wrote in his editorial note to the first issue of the magazine—was also a desire for a high male print culture that could exclude the low theatrics of popular spectacle. But theatrics are hard to exclude, particularly when a showy entrance is necessary for market success, as the prankster Beardsley seems to have recognized. (Indeed, it is worth noting that while *The Savoy* took its name from the opulent new London Hotel, at Beardsley’s suggestion, it also bears the name of the theater where Gilbert &
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Sullivan staged their popular operettas.) While everyone who has commented on the incident of *The Savoy*’s prospectus mentions the main figure’s corporeal edit, no one has commented on what seems to me to be the more striking change in the transformation from prospectus to contents page: it is not only the penis that has disappeared but also the stage. The footlights, the curtain, and the audience are gone, replaced by the small figure of an English bulldog, who peers at us rather stoically from the left edge of the image. John Bull is still ridiculous and still theatrical—but less explicitly so, on both counts. And yet, even here, Beardsley manages to retain a vestige of his original critique: not only in the theatrical nature of the gesture—the direction of the readerly gaze to the performance behind the page if not the stage curtain—but also the fact that John Bull himself is robbed of optic power. As in the original, his eyes remain firmly shut against the exhibition he has made of himself. Beardsley’s male critics may have attempted to castrate castration, in other words, but as with Freud’s Medusean figure for female materiality and male anxiety (no serpents here, only a winged top hat), John Bull as hero/monster is nonetheless still rendered blind. What we might see in this vision of spectacular authorship—and the revisions made to it—is a farcical, fin de siècle repetition of the serious struggle over literary and authorial capital that took place during the nineteenth century. If Beardsley was willing to unveil the author in all of his theatrical and dandiacal splendor, he was only acknowledging publicly what had always been feared privately. Literature is in the business of show. And if John Bull was demoted from cover to contents page, his position there only underscores the common practice by which the exteriority of theater was used to indicate literature’s superior and interior contents. With his strut and his smirk, and his self-satisfied glory, this final performer reminds us what it has been the goal of this book to suggest: that nineteenth-century literature was peopled with—because of the fact that—theater figures.