'So Persuasive an Eloquence'? Roles for Women on the Eighteenth-Century Stage.

PENNY GAY

The question which has engaged my research interest for the last couple of decades might be summarised as: how does drama make meaning for the contemporary society on which—more than any other type of literary endeavour—it depends for its very survival? With a book called *As She Likes It: Shakespeare's Unruly Women* (Routledge, 1994) I ventured onto the sacred high ground of Shakespeare criticism to explore the particular eloquence of women's voices in comedy. When I later wrote *Jane Austen and the Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) I was following a hunch—that Austen, with her strong dramatic talent for comedy, knew that quasi-theatrical 'scenes' provided a medium for exploring women's roles and lives through their *speech*. Austen was, in fact, fascinated by theatre, and delighted by 'real acting, good hardened real acting',[1] despite the unthinking common notion that she disapproved of theatre because the young people in *Mansfield Park* got into trouble for indulging in amateur theatricals. My research into the plays that Austen knew, and the theatrical productions that we know she attended, demonstrated that she was a discriminating and enthusiastic theatre-goer and play-reader; and that most of what she saw and read was contemporary drama. Writing that book left me with many further questions to pursue about the quality of eighteenth-century drama—and, in particular, I wondered if there was more to be known and understood about this drama than is acknowledged by the histories written in the twentieth century.

* *Penny Gay holds a Personal Chair in English Literature and Drama at the University of Sydney.* *This paper was delivered to the Arts Association, with the Department of English, as an inaugural lecture, on 18 October 2005.*

Standard histories of eighteenth-century drama go like this: musical satire, e.g. *The Beggar's Opera* (1728); sentimental drama, e.g. *The Conscious Lovers* (1722); reaction against this with *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) and *The Rivals* (1775); triumph of a new type of social satire with *The School for Scandal* (1777). These male authors—Gay, Steele, Goldsmith and Sheridan—now form the acknowledged canon of eighteenth-century drama: yet the greatest theatrical entrepreneur, and actor, of the century, David Garrick, was a patron of *female* dramatists, and initiated the career of one of the most popular playwrights of the last quarter of the century, Hannah Cowley. Of her nine major plays, *The Belle's Stratagem* (1780) continued to be performed throughout the nineteenth century. It is at least as good a play as *The Rivals*, and a more humane one than *The School for Scandal.* Its three major female roles—witty, articulate women with complex emotional lives—were favourites of the star actresses of the period. Why Cowley's plays have disappeared from the repertory is the subject of an essay I have recently published;[2] other feminist scholars are working on the plays of Aphra Behn, Susanna Centlivre, Mary Pix, Hannah More and Elizabeth Inchbald, among others.

My current project involves looking at the complete spectrum of popular eighteenth-century drama—not just that by women—to try and establish what possibilities it provided for women performers. The project will test the observation that the number and size of women's roles increased noticeably in the very active playwriting period 1660–1800; it will also explore—tentatively—the idea that the spectacle of eloquent women on stage, often speaking 'out of turn', may have contributed to the gradual acceptance of the notion that women might have something valuable to say in the public political sphere.

To put what I have to say in the rest of this paper into perspective, a little background is necessary. In the eighteenth century a night's entertainment at one of the two Theatres Royal, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, would offer a great deal of music, before, after, and during the acts—songs, dances, orchestral pieces. The 'mainpiece' or full-length five-act presentation might

be an opera, a Shakespeare play, or a contemporary comedy or tragedy. There would follow at least one 'afterpiece', usually a two- or three-act farce or what we would recognise as a musical comedy, a play with songs. Star actors and actresses were as likely to be found in the afterpiece as in the mainpiece. So, the first task of my project was to make an analytic database of the popularity of plays, based not on the presumed importance of 'serious' mainpieces, but on the pragmatic evidence of how many times, on average, a play of any genre was performed in a season (October–May). That is, what did the managers know to be surefire money-spinners for their companies?

The first period we have analysed covers the years 1720–76, which includes the period of Garrick's ascendancy (his debut was in 1741) as principal actor and manager of the Drury Lane Theatre. This enquiry has already thrown up some interesting statistics, particularly if we eliminate the Shakespeare plays (the major male-centred tragedies certainly hold their place), and operas or musicals, which—although frequently sharing performers with spoken theatre—attracted their audiences principally through the affective power of music rather than the speech-performance of relatively complex characters. The most popular contemporary spoken mainpieces up to 1776 were: Cibber's *The Provoked Husband* (premiered 1728), Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem* (premiered 1707), Hoadly's *The Suspicious Husband* (premiered 1747), Garrick and Colman's *The Clandestine Marriage* (premiered 1766), Steele's *The Conscious Lovers* (premiered 1722), Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (premiered 1706, the first play to be performed in Australia, in 1789), Susannah Centlivre's *The Busy Body* (premiered 1709), Cumberland's *The Brothers* (premiered 1769). Few of these are even heard of today, much less performed. The top 20 plays *altogether* in this period include six musical comedies, eleven two- or three-act farces, and three spoken mainpieces, *The Provoked Husband, The Beaux' Stratagem* and *Hamlet*—which come in at numbers 14, 18 and 20. Clearly theatre historians have to rethink their categories of what was successful in the theatrical culture of the period. The doyen of

British theatre historians, Allardyce Nicoll,[3] wrote his histories according to criteria based on a taxonomy of genre (comedy of manners, sentimental comedy, domestic tragedy, etc) which frequently ignores the question of whether a play was actually popular, and if so, what made it popular, what its *affective* qualities actually were.

Female stars

Since the introduction of women actors to the stage at the Restoration, there had been a steady growth in their acceptance and respectability. By the time of the Garrick period, there were as many female 'stars', proportionally to the population, as there are today; and as many variations of performance styles and private lives. Many of the actresses of this period were independent businesswomen ('Mrs' only for convenience and respectability), running their own theatres, negotiating their acting contracts, arguing with managers about their roles. They were articulate and eloquent (despite the presence, as ever, of the occasional brainless beauty on the lookout for a titled gentleman lover).

In regard to women and the stage, valuable work has been done by feminist historians about the conditions of work of these women, whether actresses, playwrights, managers—or all three. However, nothing substantial has been written about an issue which intrigues me: what effect did the employment of adult women in female roles have on the general social perception of women as speaking and feeling subjects? What, in short, was it possible for actresses to do to change the audience's ideas about women? The answers, I suggest, may be found in an analysis of their roles, not just as 'carriers' of plot points and visual objects of sexual allure or pathos, or representing various moral abstractions, but in what they say—their *eloquence*, their newly permitted ability to debate the often conventional plot situations they find themselves in.[4]

Recent critical work has focused on eighteenth-century theories of acting, and their relation with other contemporary ideas about

the rise of 'sensibility' and moves towards what we recognise as romanticism, particularly the theory of *empathy*. But women's eloquence in eighteenth-century drama (and fiction, which was often dramatic in method—for example, in epistolary fiction) should not simply be subsumed under 'sensibility', for that is to reduce its affective qualities to an accepted and understood popular discourse. Eloquence is of course a combination of effective language and affective embodiment; as we can see from the comments made by contemporaries about the performances of actresses in new and popular plays of the mid-eighteenth century. Here follow some examples.

Women in three popular plays

David Garrick's *The Lying Valet* (1741) is a two-act farce; it was a very popular afterpiece. The role of the chambermaid, Kitty Pry, witty and outwitting, was written for the star actress Kitty Clive, with Garrick himself playing the name part. The plot concerns the attempts of the impecunious Gayless to marry the heiress Melissa, assisted by the lies of his valet Sharp, played by Garrick. The scheming male servant is an ancient tradition in the theatre; the clever maidservant a relatively new development. And the *eloquent* clever maidservant is an invention virtually new in the eighteenth century. Much of her part consists of adroit interrogation of Sharp with leading questions in order to reveal the poor financial state of his master, and advice to her mistress Melissa, in which she has the role of the experienced woman of the world:

> KITTY: The Affair is this, Madam, Mr. *Gayless* is over Head and Ears in Debt; you are over Head and Ears in Love; you'll marry him to-morrow, the next Day your whole Fortune goes to his Creditors, and you and your Children are to live comfortably upon the remainder.
>
> MELISSA: I cannot think him base.
>
> KITTY: But I know they are all base—You are very young, and very ignorant of the Sex; I am young too, but have more Experience:

you never was in Love before; I have been in Love with an hundred, and try'd 'em all; and know 'em to be a Parcel of barbarous, perjured, deluding, bewitching Devils.

MELISSA: The low Wretches you have had to do with, may answer the Character you give 'em; but Mr. *Gayless*.—

KITTY: Is a Man, Madam.[5]

As Melissa comments, 'We discover our weaknesses to our servants, make them our confidants, put 'em upon an equality with us, and so they become our advisers.' It is a sign of the proto-revolutionary authority implicit in this dynamic that the servant Kitty has the closing address to the audience at the end of Act 1:

KITTY: Oh Woman, Woman, foolish Woman! she'll certainly have this *Gayless*: nay, were she as well convinc'd of his Poverty as I am, she'd have him.—A strong Dose of Love is worse than one of Ratifia; when it once gets into our Heads, it trips up our Heels, and then good Night to Discretion. Here is she going to throw away fifteen thousand Pounds; Upon what? Faith, little better than Nothing.—He's a Man, and that's all— and Heaven knows meer Man is but small Consolation.

Be this Advice pursu'd by each fond Maid,
Ne'er slight the Substance for an empty Shade:
Rich, weighty Sparks alone should please and charm ye;
For should Spouse cool, his Gold will always warm ye.

Kitty Clive (Figure 1) was the most famous of the mid-century's comediennes; her career lasted from 1728 (when she was 17) to 1768; she died in 1785. Several aspects of her career are of particular interest to my enquiries. First of all, and contrary to a popular myth about eighteenth-century actresses, she lived a life free of sexual scandal, having made a brief marriage—perhaps of convenience—to George Clive, a lawyer; they separated by mutual agreement after two years. Although Kitty had many male friends, she was never amorously linked with anyone, and lived in her old age tranquilly at Twickenham in a chaste friendship with the writer and dilettante Horace Walpole. Secondly, she was an accomplished soprano singer, who could have made a career

Figure 1: Kitty Clive, 1711–85.

solely in musicals and operas (she was the first Dalila in Handel's *Samson*), but she gravitated more and more, as her career progressed, towards the contemporary roles being written for witty, eloquent women. Her roles numbered at least 180. I find it particularly interesting that the role she frequently chose for her benefit night was Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*—Shakespeare's first witty, eloquent and proactive heroine. However, Kitty Clive usually received poor reviews for her 'low comedy' Portia, in which she often parodied contemporary judges in the famous Trial Scene. Clearly her performance didn't suit the standard notion of the role as that of a noble and grave *grande dame*, reluctantly getting into male attire to save her true love (this idea of the role was the norm until the early- to mid-twentieth century). But she kept on doing it: she had an instinct that it was indeed her role. In her retirement she wrote to her protégée Jane Pope (who was in her turn to become a great comedienne and interpreter of Hannah Cowley's works): 'I charge you to make a good part of it [a new role] let it be never so bad. I have often done so myself therefore I know *it is to be done* turn it & wind it & play it in a different manner to his intention and an hundred to one but you succeed.'[6] Trust the actress, her instincts, her technique, her presence. It's very clever advice, and it goes counter to the standard instructions of eighteenth-century acting manuals.

The latter, of course, have little to say about comedy: sentiment, sensibility, and the grand style of tragedy are what acting theory is about, for these theorists. But actors—even today—know that great comic ability is the hardest technique to learn, particularly if it is constrained by a pre-written script (rather than the improvisational anarchy of physical clowning). David Garrick was the century's pre-eminent actor because he could perform both comedy and tragedy scripts with a superb naturalism. Of his female colleagues, the nearest to him in possessing this versatility was his acting partner of twenty years, Hannah Pritchard. Garrick and Pritchard were famous as the Macbeths, but they were equally admired for their performances in Benjamin Hoadly's comedy mainpiece, *The Suspicious Husband* (1747). As

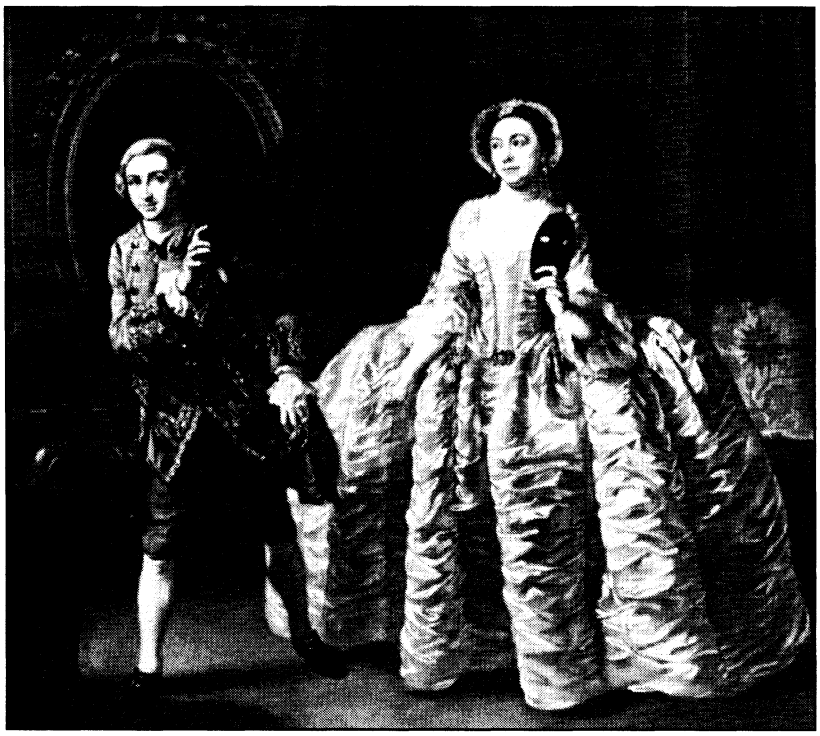

Figure 2: Hannah Pritchard as Clarinda and Garrick as Ranger in *The Suspicious Husband.*

with *The Lying Valet*, we find that the two star actors do not play the leading roles of the lovers, or even those of the married couple who give the play its title, but rather, a fascinating pair of unconventional characters, who happen to be cousins. Ranger, as his name implies, is a rake—even trying to seduce his cousin Clarinda when he meets her as an anonymous 'mask' (Figure 2; she laughs at him). Clarinda is in love with Frankly, whom she met briefly and anonymously at Bath. She is determined to 'tease' him when they meet again in London, *because* she is attracted to him. The suspicious husband of the play's title, Mr Strictland, doesn't like his wife associating with the free-spoken Clarinda. In Act II the trio of female friends—Clarinda, Jacintha (the *ingénue*), and Mrs Strictland —discuss men and marriage: this is *Sex and the City*, eighteenth-century style, and a striking example in this

period of women supporting each other emotionally, rather than competing for men. Here are Clarinda's ideas about love-conquests:

> CLARINDA: ... Let me assure you, a Woman's surest Hold over a Man is to keep him in Incertainty. As soon as ever you put him out of Doubt, you put him out of your Power: But when once a Woman has awak'd his Curiosity, she may lead him a Dance of many a troublesome Mile without the least Fear of losing him at last.
>
> JACINTHA: Now do I heartily wish he may have Spirit enough to follow, and use you as you deserve. Such a Spirit, with but a little Knowledge of our Sex, might put that Heart of yours into a strange Flutter.
>
> CLARINDA: I care not how soon. I long to meet with such a Fellow. Our modern Beaux are such jointed Babies in Love, they have no Feeling. They are entirely insensible either of Pain or Pleasure, but from their own dear Persons: And according as we flatter, or affront their Beauty, they admire or forsake ours. They are not worthy even our Displeasure; and, in short, abusing them is but so much ill-nature merely thrown away. But the Man of Sense, who values himself upon his high Abilities: Or the Man of Wit, who thinks a Woman beneath his Conversation—To see such the Subjects of our Power, the Slaves of our Frowns and Smiles, is glorious indeed!

Those familiar with Restoration Comedy may recognise an echo of Congreve's Millamant in *The Way of the World* here—but that play, which premiered in 1700, was a failure. Francis Gentleman, in his contemporary survey of the stage, *The Dramatic Censor* (1770), commented at length on the success of *The Suspicious Husband*. 'No play has appeared with greater éclat for many years than the Suspicious Husband did at its first appearance, nor is any comedy more likely to live from an uncommon vivacity of dialogue, variety and pleasantry of incidents.' Garrick's star role of Ranger worried Gentleman because 'Ranger is ... a gilded bait of vice, for youth and vanity to snap at; and all his transactions tend at least to inflame, if not to taint the imagination'. (Here we see the eighteenth-century anxiety about a century of post-Restoration Don Juanism—Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*, the most striking incarnation, premiered in 1786.) But for the equivalent

role of Clarinda, Gentleman has nothing but praise:

> she is furnished with a large fund of spirits, and a slight dash of the coquette; yet capable of a settled, sincere passion, without any tendency to imprudent actions. She likes to rally, and has a pleasant flow of expression, but never sacrifices delicacy at the shrine of licentious wit.[7]

Mrs Pritchard in playing this role (which she played for seventeen consecutive seasons) had 'a freedom and fire of expression in her performance, that we have never seen surpassed' (p.349). Gentleman has to resort to metaphor to explain the affective power of Pritchard's performance; another critic slated it home to her technique, suggesting that she was *unafraid* to be on stage talking: 'however voluble her part might require her to be not a syllable of articulation was lost ... She was a mistress of dramatic eloquence in familiar dialogue.'[8]

Hannah Pritchard frequently shared the stage with Kitty Clive; they were friends, and they also shared a number of roles. But whereas Clive's forays into tragedy and sentimental drama were few and largely unsuccessful, Pritchard had a wide range and was greatly admired in all genres (over 150 roles; she also sang, though she was clearly not as accomplished in this as Clive). Her style was to inhabit the role and 'become' the character, rather than—as was common at the time—to make all characters a version of herself. This was an acting style she shared with Garrick, and it perhaps accounts for the success of their partnership. Her first major triumph was as Rosalind—another famously talkative woman—in *As You Like It*; Kitty Clive was the Celia. Pritchard played virtually all the major Shakespearean female roles, and many contemporary commentators thought her superior to the century's later Shakespearean star, Sarah Siddons, 'for Versatility of Genius, or Comprehension of various Characters'.[9]

Truly energised and memorable drama, for the eighteenth century, is in prose; but what of the other major theatrical genre, tragedy? Tragedy after Shakespeare was limited by strong conventions, which can be summarised in the formula that the

play's 'issues' are male ones, of politics, power etc; there are consequently very few female characters. The format is invariably imitation Shakespearean blank verse. There was, however, by mid-century, a recognisable sub-genre, 'she-tragedy': for example, *Douglas* (John Home, 1757), *The Grecian Daughter* (Arthur Murphy, 1772), *Percy* (Hannah More, 1777). These were popular, though not, I suspect, presenting a challenge to the various types of comedy that reigned supreme. Their central female roles—always fewer in number than the male roles—were 'eloquent' in a way that was as much to do with bodily performance as verbal ability. This is the drama of sensibility which includes, for women, tears, big gestures, 'speaking looks'. Audiences attended such performances—most notably by Sarah Siddons and her competitors—as much to gaze at the spectacle of female distress as to listen. And if they did listen, they would hear only a feeble imitation of a 'Shakespearean' grand style. Writers of the period were uncomfortably aware of this weakness, unorthodox though it may have been to cast any doubts upon the pre-eminence of tragedy among dramatic genres. Here is Colley Cibber writing in praise of Anne Oldfield, the first Lady Townly in his sentimental comedy *The Provoked Husband* (1728):

> Her Voice was sweet, strong, piercing, and melodious; her Pronunciation voluble, distinct, and musical; and her Emphasis always placed where the Spirit of the Sense, in her Periods, only demanded it. If she delighted more in the Higher Comick, than the Tragick Strain, 'twas because the last is too often written in a lofty Disregard of Nature. But in Characters of modern practis'd Life, she found occasions to add the particular Air and Manner which distinguish'd the different Humours she presented. Whereas in Tragedy, the Manner of Speaking varies, as little, as the Blank Verse it is written in.[10]

This is perhaps a rather sweeping condemnation; let us examine one final example, this time from one of the most popular she-tragedies, *The Grecian Daughter*. Here we certainly experience Euphrasia's eloquence, but also, inevitably, it seems—part of the tragic package—her physical disarray, the *spectacle* of her feminine

distress, which she herself insists upon performing. A twenty-first century audience needs reminding that Euphrasia is the dramatic heroine who saves her father's life by breast-feeding him—fortunately, off-stage. This extraordinary plot-point might indeed be read as a symbol of the cultural urge to reduce even the most eloquent of women to mere biological machines.

PHILOTAS: Alas! this frantic grief can nought avail,
Retire, and seek the couch of balmy sleep,
In this dead hour, this season of repose.

EUPHRASIA: And dost thou then, inhuman that thou art,
Advise a wretch like me to know repose?
This is my last abode; these caves, these rocks,
Shall ring for ever with Euphrasia's wrongs;
All Sicily shall hear me; yonder deep
Shall echo back an injur'd daughter's cause;
Here will I dwell, and rave, and shriek, and give
These scatter'd locks to all the passing winds;
Call on Evander lost; and, pouring curses,
And cruel gods, and cruel stars invoking,
Stand on the cliff in madness and despair.

PHILOTAS: Yet calm this violence; reflect, Euphrasia,
With what severe enforcement Dionysius
Exacts obedience to his dread command.
If here thou'rt found—

EUPHRASIA: Here is Euphrasia's mansion,
(falls on the ground.)
Her fix'd eternal home;—inhuman savages,
Here stretch me with a father's murder'd corse;
Then heap your rocks, your mountains on my head;
It will be kindness in you; I shall rest
Intomb'd within a parent's arms.

PHILOTAS: By Heav'n,
My heart in pity bleeds.

EUPHRASIA: Talk'st thou of pity?
Yield to the gen'rous instinct; grant my pray'r;
Let my eyes view him, gaze their last upon him,
And shew you have some sense of human woe.

PHILOTAS: Her vehemence of grief o'erpow'rs me quite.

My honest heart condemns the barb'rous deed,
And if I dare—

EUPHRASIA: And if you dare!—Is that
The voice of manhood? Honest, if you dare!
'Tis the slave's virtue! 'tis the utmost limit
Of the base coward's honour.—Not a wretch,
There's not a villain, not a tool of pow'r,
But, silence interest, extinguish fear,
And he will prove benevolent to man.
The gen'rous heart does more; will dare to all
That honour prompts.—How dost thou dare to murder?
Respect the gods, and know no other fear.

PHILOTAS: Oh! thou hast conquer'd.—Yes, Euphrasia, go
Behold thy father—

Euphrasia exits, to save her father's life and eventually to slay his oppressor (Figure 3). She is in all ways an extraordinary heroine, but her particular expressions of this are constrained by a model of feminine sensibility that today's audiences can hardly take seriously.

Even in its heyday, the high tragedy of *The Grecian Daughter* had a witty epilogue spoken by an actress, which brought the audience back to their 'normal' comic world. This one (spoken by a comedy actress who, significantly, did not take part in the play) cleverly moves between patriotic exhortation and social satire:

Britons were ne'er enslav'd by evil pow'rs;
To peace, and wedded love, they give their midnight hours;
From slumbers pure, no rattling dice can wake 'em!
Who *make* the laws, were never known to *break* 'em.
'Tis false, ye fair, whatever spleen may say,
That you down Folly's tide are borne away;
You never wish at deep distress to sneer;
For eyes, tho' bright, are brighter thro' a tear.
Should it e'er be this Nation's wretched fate
To laugh at all that's good, and wise, and great;
Arm'd at all points, let Genius take the field,
And on the stage afflicted Virtue shield,
Drive from the land each base unworthy passion,
Till Virtue triumph in despite of Fashion.

It seems particularly encouraging—and progressive—that the theatrical convention of the epilogue literally allowed actresses to have the last word, whatever may have been the disapproval of such talkativeness in the real world.

Figure 3: Mrs Siddons as Euphrasia.

Notes

I would like to record my thanks to Isobel Johnstone, who assisted with the research for this paper; and to Tony Miller and Kate Flaherty, who enlivened the lecture with their readings of the play extracts.

1 Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, vol.I, ch.13.
2 Penny Gay, 'What Happened to Hannah Cowley?', *New Windows on a Woman's World: Essays for Jocelyn Harris*, eds Colin Gibson and Lisa Marr, 2 vols, *Otago Studies in English* 9, Dunedin: Department of English, University of Otago, 2005.
3 Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of English Drama 1660–1900*, Cambridge, 1955.
4 A relevant development in the non-theatrical public domain was the institution of debating clubs. Popular in the mid-century, they were an exclusively masculine (alehouse) domain, until an experiment initiated by the actor Charles Macklin: the 'British Inquisition' of 1754–55, which ran for three months, meeting three or four times a week. Macklin 'included women and allowed them to speak in the debates' (Mary Thale, 'The Case of the British Inquisition: Money and Women in Mid-Eighteenth Century Debating Societies', *Albion* 31.1 (Spring 1999): 31–48, p.40).
5 David Garrick, *The Lying Valet* (1741), Act 1. Quoted from a transcription of the first edition on the *English Drama* Full-Text Database (Chadwyck-Healey, 1997). All subsequent quotations from plays are sourced from this database.
6 Kitty Clive, quoted in Philip H. Highfill, Jr, Kalman A. Burnim and Edward A. Langhans, *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660–1800*, vol.3, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975, p.361.
7 Francis Gentleman, *The Dramatic Censor*, vol.2, London: J. Bell, 1770, pp.349–50.
8 Thomas Davies, in Anthony Vaughan, *Born to Please: Hannah Pritchard, Actress, 1711–1768—A Critical Biography*, London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1979, p.117). Pritchard too lived a blameless domestic life, in her case married and the mother of three children.
9 Mrs Hester Thrale, in Highfill, *Biographical Dictionary*, vol.12, p.188.
10 Colley Cibber, 'To the Reader', *The Provoked Husband*, London: J. Watts, 1728, p.2.