ESLJ
THE EDINBURGH STUDENT LITERARY JOURNAL

Censorship of Theatre in a "Theatre of Censorship": Interrogating the Multivalent Sources of Censorship on the British Stage

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January 2022

"To give an audience characters who closely resemble themselves is…to disturb the boundaries between art and life" (Parkes 12)

With close reference to Frances Burney's *The Witlings,* George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession* and Harley Granville Barker's *Waste*, this essay will explore how playwrights, theatre managers, theatres and audience members navigated and were affected by formal and informal channels of censorship inherent in the ecosystem of British drama. The choice of the term 'ecosystem' is deliberate. Fundamentally, stage censorship is the "interference, usually by or on behalf of government or religious authority…in the content or representation of a dramatic work…in order to ensure its conformity with…political, moral, aesthetic, or religious norms" (Stephens et al. n.p.). This characterises it as a two-dimensional and unidirectional phenomenon – a one-sided application of power. However, after interrogating the circumstances surrounding the attempted suppression of Burney, Shaw and Barker's plays, the sources, applications and consequences of censorship prove to be far more disparate in nature. Therefore, 'ecosystem' appropriately conveys censorship's intricate and symbiotic complexity than the basic definition here would suggest. To set the stage, I begin by exploring the Lord Chamberlain's office and its role in refusing licences to works which were deemed guilty of "indecency, impropriety, profanity, seditious matter, and the representation of living persons" ("Lord Chamberlain" n.p.). This is followed by an examination of Parkes's "theatre of censorship" (xi) and how its concepts augment my subsequent analyses of the literary history surrounding Burney, Shaw and Barker's plays. My objective is not to construct a coherent theory which would link the censorship of these three works together, for each had individual, unique circumstances which would prevent this. Rather, I will strive to deconstruct how agents of censorship and its consequences are multivalent, and essentialising frameworks should be avoided to allow for a more sophisticated understanding of how censorship functions in British theatre.

The Lord Chamberlain is an "officer of the British Royal Household" who began to "intervene directly in the regulation of theatres and in censorship" following the Restoration of King Charles II in 1660. His powers were "legally formulated by the Licensing Act of 1737" ("Lord Chamberlain" n.p.), which mandated "playwrights and managers to submit plays…fourteen days before a first performance, and promised financial penalties if unlicensed plays were acted". While the Lord Chamberlain was the ultimate arbiter of a play's legality for public performance, he was aided by the Examiner and the Comptroller – the former was responsible for ensuring that the "censorship of new plays was thorough, excising any comment that could be interpreted out of context" (Russell n.p.), while the latter "[acted] as a conduit between the [Examiner] and Lord Chamberlain", responsible for verifying "the significance of [the Examiner's] concerns" (Shellard 15). This system of control featured prominently to prevent *Mrs Warren's Profession* and *Waste* from initially receiving a licence for public performance, and remained a mainstay within the British theatre industry until its repeal through the 1968 Theatres Act, which removed the Lord Chamberlain's censorial duties and "[vested] theatre licensing in local authorities" ("Lord Chamberlain" n.p.). *The Witlings* had not been subject to review by the Lord Chamberlain's office, as Burney's father, Charles, and Samuel Crisp, "her elderly friend and literary censor" (Sabor and Sill 9), successfully "advised the complete suppression of the play" (Fellion and Inglis 63) and no public performance was attempted as a result. Burney's experiences with censorship in this regard distinctly diverges from Shaw and Barker's encounters with the Lord Chamberlain, and will be interrogated to highlight how efforts to control and influence literary output was just as prevalent, and arguably more consequential, through informal channels.

Parkes defines the "theatre of censorship" as "the social space in which texts and authors [become] subject to public censure and legal action – so that the culture of censorship itself was implicitly put on trial" (xi). He argues that "the theatre denotes the scene of literary encounters with the moral and political discourses of public life…[and] functions as a locus of tension and conflict…a site for *representing, creating, and responding* to uncertainties about selfhood and social knowledge in diverse texts" (17, emphasis added). Consequently, "to give an audience characters who closely resemble themselves is…to disturb the boundaries between art and life…[and] push to the limits…ways in which their mirror images conform to, or transgress, accepted codes of behaviour" (12). Thus, 'theatre' is not merely a location for performance that is spatially and temporally limited, but also a placeholder which embodies a system and reflects a society; an undefined *space* through which contestations over the acceptability and permissibility of a playwright's creative work may occur. From this, depending on the perspective one adopts, 'audience' may simply refer to spectators of a performance, but may also be perceived as agents of censorship - the latter interpretation will become evident as the circumstances surrounding the writing and editing of *The Witlings* is interrogated. Indeed, configured into Parkes's "theatre of censorship" (xi), 'theatre' and 'audience' do not remain passive locations for and spectators of performance, but possess the capacity and agency to inflect and inflict censorship. In re-conceptualising these thespian elements in relation to the plays by Burney, Shaw and Barker, I hope to subvert the view of censorship in British theatre as monolithic, and instead demonstrate its multifaceted sources and consequences. With this, I now turn to examine *The Witlings*, the literary history of which highlights how the forces of censorship may not always be publicly visible.

Described as "a sharp satire in the comedy of manners tradition", *The Witlings* was Burney's first foray into writing for the theatre after encouragement from her father Charles,

Samuel Crisp, and her learned group of friends, all of whom were prominent participants in Britain's artistic and literary marketplace. Prior to its completion, Burney had already achieved "the acclaim of literary London in the winter of 1778-79" following the publication of her first novel, *Evelina*, and this venture into drama was an attempt to enter "what was then regarded as a higher form of art" (Sabor and Sill 9, 11). The play was first presented privately by Charles Burney to "an audience that included Samuel Crisp, Frances's sisters Susanna and Charlotte, and others" (Sabor and Sill 12) and the immediate reaction from her sisters was positive and encouraging. Susanna, in a letter to Frances, wrote that "the first act diverted us *extremely* all round…Charlotte laugh'd till she was almost black in the face…[and] I wish there was more of this Sort – so does my Father – so, I believe, does Mr. Crisp" (Burney 302). This must have been extremely heartening for Frances to have read, for prior to the presentation of her play, she had written to Crisp for feedback as *The Witlings* remained "a play in manuscript, & *capable* of alterations" (Burney 301). The positive review from her sister, who also affirmed that their father and Crisp enjoyed the performance, would have encouraged Burney to continue her foray into the theatre. Further, the strength of reaction from her sister is testament to Burney's ability to incisively and wittily satirise various aspects of London's literary society, providing the audience "characters who closely resemble themselves…to disturb the boundaries between art and life" (Parkes 12).

Unfortunately, a joint letter from her father and Crisp a few days later made clear their wishes to have *The Witlings* "taken off the boards" (Sabor and Sill 13) to Burney's great dismay, and her anger and disappointment is palpable in how she referred to their correspondence as a "Hissing, groaning, catcalling Epistle" (Burney 305). The reason, ostensibly, for the position of Charles Burney and Crisp had been how *The Witlings* resembled "a recognisable portrait of some influential literary women of the time, particularly

the leader of the Bluestocking group, Elizabeth Montagu" (Sabor and Sill 12), and both were concerned that permitting a public performance of the play would be risking "not only her professional reputation as a writer, but also her personal reputation, her position in society, and by extension her father's social standing" (Fellion and Inglis 57). Margaret Doody explores this further in her biography of Burney's life, arguing that her father's "career as a historian of music…depended upon the patronage of persons of Mrs. Montagu's class" and therefore, he and Crisp might be seen to be only "[pretending] to act out of concern for Frances's own interests" (Sabor and Sill 14). These developments serve as a concrete example of how audience members at a theatrical performance may be both passive viewers, as in Burney's sisters, and active agents of censorship, as in Burney's father and Crisp. Further, their attempt to wholly suppress the play is aggravated by the close relationship they shared with the playwright, evident in the strength of her displeasure and exasperation which materialises as she attempts to resist their call for *The Witlings* to be suppressed (Burney 304-305). The significance of two male figures interfering with the literary career of a female writer is also not lost, and underscores how patriarchal mores of the period and its insistence "on the physical and mental differences between the sexes and…[how] women should accept that their roles in life involved child rearing, housekeeping, and nothing more" (Lynch 9) intersected with the implementation of censorship to prevent them from achieving independence of action and thought. Indeed, "Burney could not, or would not, overrule her father and Crisp" (Fellion and Inglis 65).

There were attempts to convince both Charles Burney and Crisp to allow *The Witlings* to enter rehearsal with the hope of eventually staging a public performance, most notably by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who was then the owner of the Theatre Royal on Drury Lane, home to one of the two patent theatre companies permitted to operate legally in the city under

the Licensing Act of 1737 (Russell n.p.). In a letter to Crisp, Frances describes how Sheridan had "[protested] he would not *accept* [her] refusal" and had "beg'd [Charles Burney] …that he could take no denial to *seeing* what [Frances] had done". Burney wrote in an earlier journal entry that Sheridan had "much rather see pieces before their Authors were contented with them than afterwards, on account of sundry small changes always necessary to be made by their managers, for Theatrical purposes", and had promised to produce *The Witlings* (Burney 297, 306).

In spite of such high-profile lobbying by one of the most influential theatre managers in London at the time, both Charles Burney and Samuel Crisp remained obstinate "that the play should not be staged…[and] all talk of revision and potential production [would be] in vain" (Sabor and Sill 13). Their censure of her attempts to produce and stage the first comedy of her literary career resulted in a 'chilling effect' on future work, as she wrote and published novels and tragedies but avoided engaging with comedies (Sabor and Sill 17). There had been another attempt to have a comedy staged approximately ten years later, this time titled *Love and Fashion*, "but was, like *The Witlings*, suppressed at her father's command" (Fellion and Inglis 66). Burney's encounter with censorship highlights how it would be incorrect to regard it as a straightforward application of a civil or legal mechanism. Here, members of a private audience who shared close relations with Frances Burney functioned as agents of censorship, which resulted in the complete suppression of *The Witlings* and an alteration in Burney's public literary career. The resistance displayed by Sheridan augments our understanding of British theatre by exemplifying how managers may serve as an intermediary between playwrights and the censoring entity as they fought to bring a chosen work to fruition – to no avail here, unfortunately. This is similarly observed with *Love and Fashion*, when Thomas Harris, the owner of the other patent theatre company in London, Covent Garden Theatre,

failed to convince Charles Burney to give the script a chance (Sabor 146-147). Finally, Burney's failure to wrestle control away from both her father and Samuel Crisp, coupled with her eventual reliance on the male owners of the two patent theatre companies in London, highlight the impossibility of decoupling the effect of society's patriarchal mores on the ecosystem of British theatre, and how they functioned as forces of censorship during the Georgian era. According to Linda Colley, "the new idea that…a woman's place was not simply in the home but also in the nation could justify or at least extenuate the affront to proper female modesty represented by publication - by a women's entry into the public sphere of authorship", which continued to be dominated by men, and "educated women…remained targets of masculine scorn" (Lynch 9). Such misogyny is, in fact, the subject of Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession*, to which I now turn.

One of three works in a collection Shaw calls *Plays Unpleasant, Mrs Warren's Profession* "portrays the successful brothel-keeper as making a practical career choice in a society that underpays and undervalues women" (Innes 15). Such a public exposition of prostitution and linking its prevalence in society to the capitalistic violence which the patriarchy enacts on women is an indictment of the strictures by which British society was organised in the late-Victorian period, and would have necessarily shocked a reading polity, the play "[attacking] the complacensies and moralism of [the] audience" (Robson 872) . This came under constant critique throughout the entirety of the play as the titular character pointedly equates the institution of marriage with prostitution, asserting:

> "The only way for a woman to provide for herself decently is for her to be good to some man that can afford to be good to her. If she's in his own station of life, let her

> make him marry her; but if she's far beneath him she can't expect it. It wouldn't be for her own happiness" (Shaw, "Mrs Warren's Profession" 40).

The Lord Chamberlain's office refused Shaw's request for a licence to legitimately perform the play, denouncing it as "immoral and otherwise improper for the stage" (Innes 15). The Examiner of Plays at the time, George Redford, told Shaw to submit a "licensable play" and he would "endeavour to forget that he ever read the original", which resulted in the production of an "innocuous three-act version…licensed for performance at Victoria Hall, Bayswater, in 1898" (Sova 187-188). One theatre manager, J. T. Grein, who founded the Independent Theatre Society, a "subscription society…[which] aimed to give performances of plays of literary and artistic rather than commercial value" (Clarke 378), described the unexpurgated version of *Mrs Warren's Profession* as "unfit for women's ears" and had consequently refused to produce it (Innes 38), which circles back to the determination of a patriarchal system in persisting with the imposition of its mores .

At this juncture, it is apparent that the encounters which *Mrs Warren's Profession* had with censorship diverge significantly from those experienced by *The Witlings*. The agent of censorship in this instance may be described as the Lord Chamberlain and his Examiner. Yet, by participating in the process and watering down his text to achieve a licence for performance at Victoria Hall, I argue that Shaw had become his own agent of censorship. However, in using censorship as a means to resist the Lord Chamberlain's office and its powers, Shaw makes a partial climbdown which is nonetheless better than a complete retreat. Thus, the theatre, beyond a place for public performance, also becomes a space for Shaw to negotiate the machinery of censorship operated by the Lord Chamberlain's office. He pithily

intimates such an approach in the apology which prefaced the text of *Mrs Warren's Profession*:

> "I have pointed out…that the influence of the theatre in England is growing so great that private conduct, religion, law, science, politics, and morals are becoming more…theatrical, whilst the theatre itself remains impervious to common sense…That is why I fight the theatre, not with pamphlets and sermons and treatises, but with plays" (Shaw, "Mrs Warren's Profession" 5).

Further, while Sheridan vociferously fought for *The Witlings* to be given a chance to enter production, Grein had echoed the sentiments of the Lord Chamberlain's office and expressed his refusal to lead a production of *Mrs Warren's Profession*, which underscores how theatre managers could represent either a force for or against the censorship of drama. Here, Grein becomes an extension of the Lord Chamberlain's function by denying Shaw a space where his play may be performed, arguably a factor which compelled Shaw to the selective excision of his play for a licence from the Lord Chamberlain in 1898. He did, however, eventually manage to circumvent the Lord Chamberlain and organise a performance of the original *Mrs Warren's Profession* with the Stage Society in 1902, the apology to which is alluded to above.

Much like Grein's Independent Theatre Society, the Stage Society was founded to "produce plays of artistic merit not likely to be performed in the commercial theatre", a considerable number of "which had been refused a license" ("Stage Society" n.p.). This was legal, as "a private and gratuitous performance [did] not fall within the terms of any existing Statute" (Craies 201). In addition to *Mrs Warren's Profession*, Barker's *Waste* was also a beneficiary of the Stage Society's private membership after the Lord Chamberlain's office refused a licence due to its supposedly "outspoken references to sexual relations" (Sova 311).

George Redford, the same Examiner who refused a licence to Shaw, demanded the deletion of all references to "an illegal operation", referring here to abortion – this was in spite of the plot being principally about a politician's "brief affair with a married woman", and the consequences this had for his career. The inconsistencies in the Lord Chamberlain's decision-making process, having recently granted a licence to Barker "to stage another play, Elizabeth Robin's *Votes for Women*, which contained references to abortion" engendered "an anticensorship campaign, in which 71 British playwrights appealed directly to the Prime Minister", resulting in the creation of "a Joint Select Committee of both Houses of Parliament in 1909" (Nicholson 183-184). The consequences of the Lord Chamberlain's explicit and overt censorship in this instance did not produce its intended effect of silencing material deemed contrary to the public good. Instead, it compelled Shaw, Barker and playwrights across Britain to circumvent censorial authority by locating their work in spaces which were beyond the authority of the Lord Chamberlain, and subsequently challenge its powers through a direct petition to the government. Indeed, the "[distinguishing]…between patent and non-patent theatres [in the Licensing Act of 1737]...created a culture of theatrical illegitimacy that…produced numerous opportunities…to flout the Lord Chamberlain's censorial authority" (Shellard 9). Such reactions to institutional power ought to be included in our understanding of the dynamics of censorship inherent in the ecosystem of British theatre.

I began this essay by briefly exploring the Lord Chamberlain's role in suppressing plays deemed unsuitable for public performance. Following this, I unpacked Parkes's "theatre of censorship" (xi) and posited that its conceptual framework allowed a better appreciation of censorship's complexity in the British theatre industry. I proceeded to look at *The Witlings*, *Mrs Warren's Profession* and *Waste* along with their unique literary histories in turn. In my analyses, I highlighted how 'playwright', 'theatre manager', 'theatre' and 'audience' and

their relationship to censorship are often more complicated than a basic definition would let on. Specifically, the circumstances surrounding the writing and editing of Burney's *The Witlings* highlights how the censorship of literary work might be effected through informal channels - in this case, Burney's father and her friend Crisp, which is distinct from the censorship of Shaw and Barker's plays, which were directly impacted through the Lord Chamberlain. Common to these three examples were how theatres and theatre managers served as intermediary spaces and actors, either arguing for or against the censorship of a play. Although the Lord Chamberlain's censorial duties have now been repealed, censorship, both overt and covert, continues to exist. It remains incumbent on us – participants in the democratic 'theatre' – to challenge it, for fear we should not obtain "any real view of life at all" (Shaw, "The Censorship of the Stage" 261).

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