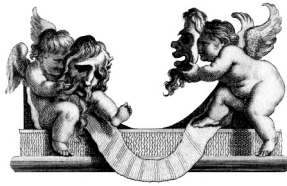


# 9

## A Christian Hero at Drury Lane



**W**hen Christopher Rich was kicked out of Drury Lane, everyone assumed that would be the end of his troublesome career in the London theatre. Rich, however, was a man who seemed to be constitutionally incapable of even contemplating defeat, so when he realised that his time at Drury Lane was at an end, he turned his attention to the theatre that was now standing empty in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

From as far back as 1708, when things were getting rocky, Rich had been paying rent on the Lincoln's Inn Fields building, which had been unused since Betterton took his company to the Haymarket in 1705. With Drury Lane now occupied by his enemies, Rich began what was virtually a reconstruction of the old tennis court to turn it into a serious rival to his former theatre. There was one huge problem: although he held both patents issued by Charles II, he had been silenced, so even if he had a theatre, he couldn't put on plays. However, with a new monarch on the throne and a new Lord Chamberlain in office, he thought he would try again, and he got one of his well-connected investors in the Lincoln's Inn Fields project to speak to the King. George I probably knew little and cared less about Rich's management of Drury Lane, and simply said that, when he used to visit London as a young

man, there were two theatres, and he didn't see why there shouldn't be two theatres again. (The King's Theatre in the Haymarket was now an opera house.) The order of silence was lifted, and Rich spent the autumn of 1714 getting ready for a re-opening. However, he didn't live to see it. Christopher Rich died on 7 November, leaving the majority interest in the new venture to his son John, who opened the new theatre on 14 December 1714 with a performance of *The Recruiting Officer*.

John Rich had no formal education, and was said to be illiterate. This must have been an exaggeration, but he may have been dyslexic. He stumbled over words and claimed not to be able to remember people's names. (He always called Garrick 'Griskin'.) He came to theatre management blissfully unburdened by any high-falutin' ideas about the role of theatre in the culture: as far as he was concerned, it was just about getting bums on seats, and he soon found a brilliant way to do that. After a few attempts at acting, he discovered his true vocation as a dancer. He began to appear as Harlequin, which he made into a non-speaking part so that he wouldn't have to remember lines, and was known professionally as Lun.

Rich played a key role in the development of pantomime, which emerged at this time and became a vital part of theatre culture, to the despair of those who wanted theatre to be an intelligent and verbal experience. It had all started so innocently – over at Drury Lane.



## The Loves of Mars and Venus

**John Weaver (1673-1760) was a dancer**, choreographer and theorist of dance who has been described by one dance historian as 'the major figure in British dance before the present [twentieth] century'.<sup>1</sup> He studied the history of dance, which he wanted to promote as an art form in its own right, 'worthy the regard and consideration... of the learned world',<sup>2</sup> rather than just a bit of light relief between the acts of a play. He was particularly interested in the *pantomimi*, the dancers of the ancient Greek and Roman theatre who could tell a story without

the need of words, and in March 1717 he put on at Drury Lane *The Loves of Mars and Venus*, which was described on the playbill as ‘a new dramattick entertainment of dancing after the manner of the antient pantomimes’.<sup>3</sup> This was the first time that a show had been described as a pantomime – Greek for ‘all in mime’ – and the name stuck. *The Loves of Mars and Venus* was not a full evening’s entertainment but an afterpiece, meaning a short entertainment which would follow the five-act play that was the main business of the evening. Afterpieces had become popular by the early years of the eighteenth century, and made for a very long evening in the theatre of four hours or more, although not everyone would stay for the complete bill of fare. Pantomimes would remain as afterpieces for many years.

Weaver followed this in April with *The Shipwreck, or Perseus and Andromeda*, which he described as ‘a new dramattick entertainment of dancing in grotesque characters’.<sup>4</sup> The ‘grotesque characters’ were Harlequin and his companions from the harlequinade, who impersonated the characters of the myth: Harlequin was Perseus and Colombine was Andromeda, the princess he rescues from a sea-monster. Weaver described his grotesques as ‘a faint imitation of the Roman pantomimes’. This was the moment that pantomime assumed the form it would hold for the next century: a serious story, often from classical mythology, would be mixed up with a ludicrous story using the characters of the harlequinade. Sometimes the plots would run in parallel, alternating serious scenes and comic scenes, sometimes the characters would appear together, and sometimes the serious characters would be transformed into the characters of the Harlequinade. Pantomime came to mean a mixture of certain elements: a story from mythology, legend, fairy tale or nursery rhyme; a harlequinade; singing, dancing, mime; special effects (especially transformations) and spectacular scenery. None of these elements were new. Singing and dancing had been an important component of theatrical performances since the Restoration; spectacular scenery and transformation scenes likewise. These had been brought together in opera, but since the vogue for Italian opera had begun, opera appealed only to élite audiences who could understand Italian (or pretend to). The singing in pantomimes

was in English, which made them more accessible. Masques involving classical gods and heroes had cropped up from time to time in the theatres. harlequinades were also very familiar on the London stage, and John Rich had already made a name for himself as Harlequin. Seeing the popularity of the new form, Rich put on an afterpiece at Lincoln's Inn Fields in November 1717 called *Mars and Venus or The Mousetrap* which was a spoof of Weaver's show at Drury Lane, with Harlequin and Scaramouche invading the serious part of the plot. He followed it up in January 1718 with *Amadis or the Loves of Harlequin and Columbine* which was a spoof of Handel's opera *Amadis*, but this time with the serious and comic characters kept separate.

The speed with which the public took to pantomimes surprised everyone. Within a very short time, they were the most popular shows on the stage. Even though they were still only afterpieces, their attractions often outweighed the mainpieces they were supposedly supporting.❖ The competition between the two theatres was so intense they would go head-to-head with pantomime versions of the same stories: after Perseus and Andromeda there were rival productions of Orpheus and Eurydice and the Rape of Proserpina. But nothing compared with the square-off that took place in 1723 when Dr Faustus was selling his soul to the devil at both Drury Lane and Lincoln's Inn Fields.

There was a feeling amongst the theatre-going public that Lincoln's Inn Fields had the advantage in pantomime, largely because of John Rich's brilliant performances as Harlequin. He could transform himself into a dog, fall to pieces on the gallows and put himself back together again, and one of his most famous routines involved his birth from an egg. So, in November 1723 the triumvirate at Drury Lane tried to gain the initiative by pulling out all the stops for *Harlequin Doctor Faustus*, a pantomime version of the legend of the man who sells his soul in exchange for infernal powers while he lives. The nub of the

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❖ The expense of the spectacular scenery caused prices to be raised for plays that would be followed by a pantomime afterpiece, to the fury of theatre-lovers who complained that they were being made to pay for nonsense they didn't want to see. As a concession, the managements agreed to refund the difference to anyone who left before the start of the overture to the pantomime.

show was taken up with the tricks that Faustus (played by Harlequin) performs courtesy of these powers: he cuts off his own leg and replaces it, then makes asses' ears appear on Scaramouche, Pierrot and Punch. At the end he is dragged off to hell while the gods of Mount Olympus perform a ballet to celebrate his death.

This time, the verdict of the town was that Drury Lane had scored a triumph over Lincoln's Inn Fields in the pantomime department – until John Rich put on *The Necromancer, or Harlequin Doctor Faustus* a month later. It was bigger and better in every way and ended up with Faustus being taken to hell by a huge dragon. *The Necromancer* became one of the greatest hits of the eighteenth century, notching up over 300 performances between 1723 and the retirement of John Rich from the stage in 1753.

Colley Cibber, meanwhile, was watching all of this with a sense of mounting horror, and must have felt at times as if he had made his own pact with the devil. Cibber was a man who regarded a good play, well acted, as one of the highest accomplishments of art, and the most rational and rewarding shared experience a community can engage in. He didn't have much time for opera, which he regarded as an 'entertainment so entirely sensual, it had no possibility of getting the better of our reasons',<sup>5</sup> but he really loathed 'the decorated nonsense and absurdities of pantomimical trumpery' which he regarded as 'so much rank theatrical popery'.<sup>6</sup> What made it worse, as he had to admit, was that Drury Lane had started the trend with its production of *The Loves of Mars and Venus*, which had seemed inoffensive enough at the time, although the managers didn't spend much on it as they doubted its box-office appeal. 'From this original hint then... sprung forth that succession of monstrous medlies that have so long infested the stage.' Writing his *Apology* in 1740, more than 20 years after the monstrous birth, Cibber could only wish that the authorities would intervene to put down 'these poetical drams, these gin-shops of the stage, that intoxicate its auditors, and dishonour their understanding, with a levity for which I want a name.'<sup>7</sup>

Cibber was far from being alone in his strong reaction to the dominance of the stage by pantomime. Many cultural gatekeepers

saw it as a serious threat, † including Alexander Pope. In *The Dunciad*, Pope's mock-heroic poem of 1728 on the decadence of the culture, the Doctor Faustus pantomimes of 1723 are seen as a defining event, while for Dr Johnson, looking back from 1747, rational entertainment on the stage had died when 'great *Faustus* lay the ghost of wit'.



## The silencing of Drury Lane

**In spite of his personal aversion to pantomimes**, Cibber had to keep putting them on in order to keep Drury Lane open. As he frequently reminds the readers of his *Apology*, theatre managers must respond to public taste, whatever their own feelings: 'If they [the multitude] will have a maypole, why, the players must give them a maypole.'<sup>8</sup> So what had happened to Sir Richard Steele's earnest intentions to reform the stage and make it a place of moral and rational entertainment?

It had got off to a good start. Steele and his three actor-managers got on well because they were all serious about theatre. Steele wasn't going to be a renter, like his predecessors, only interested in extracting money from Drury Lane: he intended to be involved in the management. He clearly wouldn't be involved with the day-to-day business of running the theatre: as a member of parliament and a busy professional author he had too many other irons in the fire. However, he was involved with selecting plays and hiring performers, and he used his social and political contacts to advance Drury Lane's interests. He respected the professionalism of the triumvirate, and they respected the fact that he gave them political influence that they would not otherwise have enjoyed.<sup>9</sup> Steele even used his experience of periodical

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‡ Theatre-lover Gabriel Rennel published a bitter attack on the Drury Lane management for going head-to-head with Lincoln's Inn Fields in the pantomime department: 'For by introducing new and ridiculous inventions into the playhouse, and by prostituting the use and dignity of the stage, they have brought their theatre into contempt.' *Tragical Reflections... occasioned by the present state of the two rival theatres in Drury-Lane and Lincolns-Inn-Fields*, London, 1723, quoted in Loftis, 226.

publishing gained through *The Spectator* and *The Tatler* to launch a new publication – *Town Talk* – which ran theatrical stories and puffs for forthcoming productions at Drury Lane. He also used *Town Talk* to publish in full the text of his patent, charging him with cleaning up the stage, and promising to purify Drury Lane.<sup>10</sup> This was unfortunate, because he couldn't deliver on the promise, and he had no shortage of enemies waiting to point this out.

The repertoire at Drury Lane remained much the same under Steele. It was still putting on the same mixture of pre-Civil War plays by Shakespeare, Fletcher and others; Restoration comedies by Congreve, Vanbrugh and Etherege; and more recent plays by Farquhar, Addison and Rowe. Although the odd smutty line or scene may have been deleted, Steele's enemies attacked him for putting on the very plays he had criticised for their immorality in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* such as Wycherley's *The Country Wife* and Etherege's *The Man of Mode*. Nor did he stick to what he called 'rational entertainments' – i.e. straight plays rather than musical pieces, farces and variety acts. On the contrary, we know that he was actively involved in hiring a successful Harlequin in Paris to bring to Drury Lane. Steele's defence was that he could not have anticipated the re-opening of Lincoln's Inn Fields under John Rich. Rich felt himself under no obligation to 'improve' the stage and drew the public with all sorts of 'irrational' entertainments, so if Drury Lane wanted to stay in business, it had to compete. Steele's sense of helplessness can be gauged from a couple of lines that he wrote on the back of a Drury Lane playbill found lying on a table in Button's coffee-house:

*Weaver, corrupter of this present age,  
Who first taught silent sins upon the stage.*<sup>11</sup>

John Weaver, the dancing master at Drury Lane, was actually on Steele's payroll, but Steele felt impotent in the face of the taste of the town. He promised the stage reformers that, as soon as he had dealt with the threat to Drury Lane from Lincoln's Inn Fields, he would get on with purifying the stage.<sup>12</sup> That didn't happen.

To make matters worse, Steele was a hopeless man of business and completely incompetent when it came to handling money. He was always in debt, no matter how much he was earning, and always in need of ready cash. Like other patent-holders before him, he sought to raise funds by mortgaging his patent. This would have been questionable even if it had been done in a regular way, given his brief from the King for moral reform, but Steele fell into the hands of con-men who tied him up in such a mesh of mortgages and remortgages that it is almost impossible now to understand it. Steele very nearly lost his patent to them altogether, which would have left a gang of crooks involved in the management of the theatre of which he had been appointed governor. His fellow sharers in the patent – the triumvirate – watched in horror as Steele put their enterprise at risk, and it is significant that from the time that these financial shenanigans started, Steele's involvement with the running of Drury Lane seems to have diminished.

Worse was to come, in the form of a show-down with the Lord Chamberlain over the powers conferred by a royal patent to run a theatre. In the years before the Civil War, legal control of all theatres was vested in the office of the Lord Chamberlain, who delegated most of the day-to-day management to his subordinate, the Master of the Revels. In 1660, with Killigrew and Davenant negotiating with Charles II to obtain powers under a patent to open theatres and maintain a monopoly, Sir Henry Herbert, the Master of the Revels, became seriously concerned about the undermining of his authority and, more specifically, the income to his office, that a patent would confer. He expected £2 to license a new play and £1 for an old one, but under the terms of the warrant issued to William Davenant and Thomas Killigrew in August 1600, they were required to 'peruse all plays... and to expunge all profaneness and scurrility'.<sup>13</sup> So why would they also pay fees to the Master of the Revels? From the time of his appointment in 1660, soon after the restoration of the monarchy, Herbert began a flurry of legal actions against Killigrew, Davenant and various actors to protect the rights of his office. In June 1662 Killigrew reached an agreement with Herbert to pay the fees demanded, although it may not have gone on for



very long.❖ The Lord Chamberlain or the Master of the Revels would sometimes intervene directly and decisively in the affairs of the theatre either to ban plays or force cuts on political grounds, but the legal authority of the Lord Chamberlain's office over a patent was a moot point. At least it was, until Colley Cibber decided to force the matter.

Soon after the granting of the patent to Richard Steele, Cibber received one of the customary demands from the Master of the Revels for a fee of £2 to license a new play. Cibber decided to knock this one on the head once and for all and went to see the Master of Revels, who at this time was Charles Killigrew, son of Thomas and still part-owner of the Drury Lane patent. Cibber said that he and his fellow-managers would be happy to pay the fees demanded, if Killigrew could produce any legal authority for them. If he could not, and if the supposed authority of the Lord Chamberlain and his officers over patent theatres were no more than an ancient custom, Cibber felt that he could not oblige the Master of the Revels to the extent of meeting financial demands for which there was no statutory basis. In spite of being pressed several times on the question, Killigrew was unable to give any legal basis for his claim to authority and Cibber thought he had won the day.<sup>14</sup> However, civil servants don't like to be defeated, and the permanent officials of government departments have long collective memories. The retaliation took a few years to come, but when it did it was serious.

On 13 April 1717, Thomas Pelham-Holles, the Duke of Newcastle was appointed Lord Chamberlain, in charge of the royal household and its dependencies – including Drury Lane, as he was determined to show. Newcastle's appointment should have been good news for Steele: they had been on friendly terms for years as they were both members of the Kit-Cat Club, and Newcastle had actually provided Steele with his parliamentary seat in Boroughbridge in Yorkshire, one of more than a dozen constituencies that were within his gift. Newcastle was

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❖ The timing is curious because, just before this agreement, Killigrew had received his patent that contained a clause not in the original warrant, stating that he was authorised to enjoy his rights: 'peaceably and quietly without the impeachment or impediment of any person or persons whatsoever'. It could easily have been assumed that the Master of the Revels was one of these 'persons'.

fabulously wealthy and a man of the greatest political and social standing. He was only 23 when he became Lord Chamberlain, which meant that Steele, at 45, was old enough to be his father. They had been used to meeting on conditions of intimacy at the Kit-Cat Club, but Newcastle was fiercely ambitious – he would later become prime minister twice – and was determined to stamp his authority on the office. Friendship wasn't going to get in the way of that.

Newcastle almost immediately summoned Steele and his three actor-managers to his office and told them he wanted them to surrender their patent and accept a new licence. This was an offer that the patentees would have been very foolish to accept, as a licence gave them much less protection than a patent, so they said no. Nothing happened immediately, but Newcastle was taking advice as to the best way to deal with these rebellious people at Drury Lane who challenged the authority of his office. There had been several skirmishes since Cibber's interview with the Master of the Revels, all of them fairly minor, but adding to the feeling within the Lord Chamberlain's office that something was going to have to be done.

In October 1719 it all blew up over what must have seemed at the time a very minor issue. Newcastle instructed the actor-managers that he wished the Irish actor Tom Erlington to be given the part of Torrismond in a revival of Dryden's play *The Spanish Friar*. Cibber replied that this was impossible as the part belonged to one of the managers. When he was urged to respect the authority of the Lord Chamberlain, Cibber replied, with a laugh, that 'they were a sort of separate ministry'<sup>15</sup> at Drury Lane, with the implication that they were beyond the control of politicians. This may have seemed like a piece of witty repartee at the time, but the Duke of Newcastle was not the sort of man to tolerate the open defiance by an actor of a department of state of which he stood at the head. On 19 December, Newcastle wrote to Steele, Barton Booth and Robert Wilks telling them that Cibber was banned from acting or participating in any way in the management of Drury Lane. Steele replied protesting that this action was an invasion of his property rights, and would cause hardship as Cibber was a popular actor. He received a reply from Henry Pelham, Newcastle's brother and his secretary, telling him that he must not attempt any further communication with His Grace.

Things then got even more serious. Newcastle had been taking legal advice as to the best way of dealing with Drury Lane, and he had been advised to leave the patent well alone. The status of the patent issued by George I to Steele was dubious, as it clearly violated the terms of the two patents granted by Charles II to Killigrew and Davenant, giving the holders exclusive rights to run theatres in London. Both of these patents were at the time held by John Rich at Lincoln's Inn Fields. However, if it were held to be valid, it might very well confer the powers that the patentees were claiming. It was much safer to go after the licence on the basis that, even with a patent, no one could run a theatre without a licence.

Newcastle summoned Barton Booth, one of the two remaining actor-managers, and told him that he intended to silence Drury Lane with a sign manual. This was about as serious as things could get, because a sign manual was a direct royal command that could not be challenged in the courts. Arguments about the powers conferred by the patent would become irrelevant. Steele, as a parliamentarian, realised the significance of this and responded in the only way now left to him: he started another periodical called *The Theatre* which ran from January to April 1720, putting his own side of the dispute. To admirers of the urbane, balanced and conversational tone that Steele had pioneered in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, the self-pitying, self-justifying tone of *The Theatre* comes as a disappointment, but it is understandable. Steele was feeling himself overwhelmed by forces he could no longer influence.

On Saturday 23 January 1720, George I issued a warrant revoking the licence granted to Steele, Cibber, Wilks and Booth in 1714. That night an order was read out from the stage at Drury Lane banning all performances until further notice. Two reasons were given for the order: the defiance of the authority of the office of the Lord Chamberlain and the frequent raising of prices by the managers.❖ It seems strange to us now that a politician should be in any way involved in fixing the prices

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❖ In the days before inflation, theatre prices were regarded as being fixed at the same level they had been at when the theatres re-opened in 1660. The management at Drury Lane – like the rival management at Lincoln's Inn Fields – would occasionally announce higher prices for a new play, for example, or an expensive pantomime. These raised prices were bitterly resented.

of seats in a theatre, but it shows the extent to which the theatre was regarded as coming under the direct control of the government.

On 27 January a new licence was issued, signed both by the King and the Duke of Newcastle, addressed to Cibber, Wilks and Booth. Steele was to be excluded from the management of Drury Lane. This new licence had the effect of lifting the order of silence imposed on Cibber. Steele was understandably furious and wrote to the actor-managers forbidding them to recommence performances. They decided to ignore him and were summoned to the Lord Chamberlain's office to swear an oath of obedience to the Lord Chamberlain and his subordinates. 'The Lord Chamberlain's authority over the playhouse is restor'd, and the patent ends in a joke' was Sir John Vanbrugh's assessment of the situation.<sup>16</sup>

The Lord Chamberlain lost no time in asserting his authority. On 2 February he ordered the managers to permit no actors' benefit performances earlier in the season than those for Mrs Oldfield and Mrs Porter (earlier benefits brought higher returns) and told them they must not raise prices for any performance without clearing it with him first. He told them to put on a tragedy by John Hughes called *The Siege of Damascus*, which appeared on 17 February, and to follow it with a 'pastoral tragedy' by John Gay called *Dione*.<sup>17</sup> The latter was, in fact, never acted, probably because it is so bad that even the Duke of Newcastle couldn't force audiences to sit through it, but the triumvirate were now left in no doubt as to who was in charge.

Meanwhile Steele was left with no involvement with Drury Lane, no share of its profits and no means of redress. It says a great deal for his fighting spirit that he continued to be active in political life and fiercely to oppose his own Whig party in government over an issue that he regarded as a point of conscience: the South Sea Scheme. The directors of the South Sea Company were offering to take over the substantial government debt that had been accrued under Queen Anne over years of warfare with Louis XIV. They promised to turn this into a huge profit for their shareholders by means that would take too long to go into here. (If this sounds improbably optimistic, it is perhaps worth observing that it was no more fantastic than some of the

‘financial products’ that brought the entire banking system to the verge of collapse in 2008.) Steele smelt a rat and used several issues of his periodical *The Theatre* to oppose the Bill. In April 1720 the South Sea Bill was passed and Steele ceased to publish *The Theatre*. Steele’s strongest ally in opposing the South Sea Bill had been Robert Walpole, a fellow member of the Kit-Cat Club. This would turn out to be fortuitous for him in respect of Drury Lane.

The South Sea Bubble set off a frenzy of stock-jobbing as share prices rose and rose until, in 1721, the bubble burst and thousands of people, including many of the richest and most powerful men in the land, faced catastrophic losses. Public fury demanded, and got, heads on the block. Ministers resigned, and Robert Walpole, as the highest-profile opponent of the South Sea Bill, was made First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer. From this point on, Robert Walpole is regarded as our first Prime Minister (although no such job description existed at the time) because he acquired such complete control over parliament that he could get any bill passed. Within a month, he had ordered that his friend and ally Sir Richard Steele must be re-instated as the governor of Drury Lane. On 2 May 1721 the Duke of Newcastle instructed Cibber, Booth and Wilks that Sir Richard Steele was indeed re-instated and that all profits that would have been due to him, had he not been barred, must be paid in full. Newcastle probably cared very little one way or the other about this, as the principle for which he had fought – that Drury Lane was to be subject to the authority of the Lord Chamberlain – had been won.



## The Conscious Lovers

**Steele was deeply relieved** to be governor of Drury Lane once again, as he desperately needed the money that his share in the patent gave him. However, his involvement with the management of the theatre ceased. He stopped going in and played no further active part in the enterprise. The triumvirate resented the fact that he wanted to take his share of the profits without doing any work, so they started making a

charge of £5 a day for their own time which was deducted from the takings before calculating profits. Steele went to court to challenge this, but the ruling went against him.<sup>❖</sup>

Ironically, it was during this period when his relations with the triumvirate were at a low point, and he was no longer involved with running Drury Lane, that Steele made his most important contribution to the project that had been occupying him for over twenty years: the reform of the stage. For years, Steele and others had been complaining that the stage was corrupting society by presenting dissolute characters as smart, witty and successful. The patent issued to Steele by George I in 1714 had specifically mentioned this problem of ‘applause bestowed on libertine characters’, while clergymen and sacred scripture were ridiculed and the Lord’s name profaned. Steele had often called for a new type of hero – a Christian hero who would behave virtuously and inspire his audiences to do likewise. But who was going to write a play with such a hero? Nobody was rushing forward to take up the challenge, especially after the failure of Addison’s pro-marriage play *The Drummer* in 1716, with the result that Drury Lane under Steele’s governorship continued to put on the bad, bawdy old Restoration comedies.

With his health failing, his political influence waning and his debts growing, Steele made a last effort to pull together ideas he had been turning over in his mind for over a decade and he wrote *The Conscious Lovers*, which opened at Drury Lane in November 1722. The play came as anything but a surprise to the town, as Steele had been plugging it relentlessly for years. He seems to have devised the outline of it by 1710,<sup>18</sup> and by 1714 Swift was satirising the plot in a poetical squib.<sup>19</sup> Just before the play opened, John Dennis, who loathed the whole Drury Lane management, wrote sarcastically that Steele had read the play to everyone he could get to sit still for long enough between Wales

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❖ Cibber gives a detailed account of this legal action without mentioning anything about the silencing of Drury Lane, the expulsion of Steele or his re-admittance to the management. This is an extraordinary gap in a narrative that claims to be frank and transparent. Cibber probably felt that it would be impossible to give an account of the events without showing himself in a bad light: Steele had stood by him when he was attacked, but Cibber didn’t back Steele at the critical moment.

and Edinburgh.<sup>20</sup> So it was no secret that Steele had written a play with the express intention of showing that ‘to be charming and agreeable shall appear the natural consequence of being virtuous’.<sup>21</sup> The question was, would it work on the stage?

Steele’s original title for the play had been *The Fine Gentleman*, because he wanted to create a hero who would be as attractive as the fine gentlemen of Restoration comedies, but who acted in strict compliance with Christian teaching. This paragon is called Bevil Junior, and he is in love with Indiana, an orphan without means. Young Bevil pays for her support, but in spite of the fact that he loves her, he never tells her as it would be ungentlemanly to take advantage, and absolutely no impropriety has taken place. Sir John Bevil wants his son to marry Lucinda, daughter of a wealthy City merchant called Mr Sealand, and Bevil won’t go against his father’s wishes as it would be undutiful. Lucinda is in love with Bevil’s friend Myrtle and Myrtle with her. Mr Sealand knows that Young Bevil is paying for the support of a woman and determines to find out what is going on. He visits Indiana and speaks to her as if she were a kept woman; she haughtily rebuffs him and he realises she is a lady; her bracelet falls off and he discovers that Indiana is his long-lost daughter by his first wife. Indiana can therefore marry Young Bevil with the blessing of both parents as she now stands to inherit a fortune and Sealand agrees to give Lucinda to Myrtle.

Whilst there is no doubting Steele’s serious moral purpose in trying to make virtue appealing, it is unfortunate that he created in Bevil Junior the most sanctimonious, prissy milksop ever to tread the boards of Drury Lane. ‘I’ll take this opportunity to visit her,’ he says of his beloved Indiana, ‘for though the religious vow I have made to my father restrains me from ever marrying without his approbation, yet that confines me not from seeing a virtuous woman that is the pure delight of my eyes and the guiltless joy of my heart.’<sup>22</sup> After an evening of this, the audience must have been pining for Horner, Dorimant and the rakehells of Restoration comedy. None of the characters are convincing as they are all brought on the stage to lecture us on virtue rather than behave in any remotely convincing way. In the last scene Myrtle says to Bevil Junior: ‘I rejoice in the pre-eminence of your

virtue',<sup>23</sup> which isn't the way in which young men normally speak to their best friends, and Steele uses an interview between Indiana and Bevil Junior to let us know that, not only is she beautiful and virtuous, but she prefers Shakespeare to opera.<sup>24</sup> This is just the sort of thing to inflame a young man's passions. Steele contrives a particularly unconvincing scene to give us his opinion on the evils of duelling, and it seems he regarded this as one of the chief beauties of the play.

*The Conscious Lovers* is now unactable and almost unreadable, but in 1722 it hit the spot. The managers gave it a lavish production, all three appearing in it themselves,<sup>❖</sup> and it made more money than any play ever put on at Drury Lane. It had an uninterrupted first run of eighteen performances, which was unheard of. The success of the play was partly the result of relentless plugging by Steele over more than a decade which raised expectation to fever pitch by the time it finally opened. Here, at last, was to be the answer to objections that had been raised to the stage for years, that it encouraged vice by rewarding immoral characters at the end of the play. Steele's play was described as the first 'exemplary comedy', which is to say, the characters are being held up as examples of good behaviour. In fact, it wasn't the first but it was certainly the most influential, and its success was another nail in the coffin of the more robust comedies of the previous generation. John Dennis, now known to us chiefly as the butt of Alexander Pope's diatribes, was one of the few critics to protest against the trend. His pamphlet, *A Defence of Sir Fopling Flutter*,<sup>25</sup> which defended the muscular satire of Ben Jonson, Wycherley, Congreve and Vanbrugh, was almost a lone voice. The Restoration comedies didn't disappear from the stage altogether, but they were performed less frequently, and in increasingly bowdlerised versions. *The Conscious Lovers* set a new benchmark for comedies that were respectable and to which a man

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❖ The plot of *The Conscious Lovers* had been taken from the *Andria* (*The Girl From Andros*) of the Roman dramatist Terence. By a strange co-incidence, Bevil Junior was played by Barton Booth, who had played Pamphilus – the equivalent character in the *Andria* – in a Latin production at Westminster School in 1695. Booth ran away from school three years later, at the age of 17, to join a troupe of strolling players in Dublin.



could take his wife without fear of offence. It would remain popular for the rest of the century.

One reason for the triumph of the new form was the increasing presence of middle-class theatregoers in the audience. The character of Mr Sealand makes a significant defence of middle-class values:

Give me leave to say that we merchants are a species of gentry that have grown into the world this last century, and are as honourable, and almost as useful, as you landed folks, that have always thought yourselves so much above us; for your trading, forsooth, is extended no farther than a load of hay or a fat ox. You are pleasant people, indeed, because you are generally bred up to be lazy; therefore, I warrant you, industry is dishonourable.<sup>26</sup>

It was no longer going to be possible for playwrights to hold up the ‘cits’ to ridicule: they represented too large a proportion of the potential audience. The aristocratic contempt in which working for a living was held by the heroes of Restoration comedies wouldn’t be acceptable any more.\* Mr Sealand was far from being Steele’s first attempt to promote middle-class values in polite society. In *The Spectator*, which he had created with Addison, the character of the merchant Sir Andrew Freeport had represented the advantages of hard work and fiscal prudence coupled with generosity of spirit. The aims of *The Spectator* had been just as didactic as *The Conscious Lovers*: ‘to enliven morality

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♣ On 4 July 1724 the *Universal Journal* published a letter complaining about the stereotyping of merchants in plays: ‘In the City may be found a very great number of learned, polite and honest generous men.’ A sign of the increasing dominance of middle-class and mercantile values in the theatre can be seen in the success of George Lillo’s ‘bourgeois’ tragedy *The London Merchant* (also known as *George Barnwell*), about an apprentice who becomes involved with a prostitute, steals from his master, commits murder and is hanged. It was customary to take apprentices in London to see a play annually on apprentice day, and since about 1675 the play chosen had always been Edward Ravenscroft’s *The London Cuckolds*, in which the wives of three city merchants cuckold their husbands with their apprentices. This was felt to be sending out the wrong message, and soon after the first performance of *The London Merchant* at Drury Lane in 1731, it was staged for this annual apprentice show until 1819. The moral tone was certainly higher, but perhaps not quite so much fun for the apprentices.

with wit, and to temper wit with morality, till I have recovered [my readers] out of that desperate state of vice and folly, into which the age is fallen'.<sup>27</sup> While *The Conscious Lovers* now seems absurd, the *Spectator* essays are still regarded as being amongst the finest in the language. For some reason, the stage doesn't make a good pulpit.\*

Steele received an enormous amount of money from *The Conscious Lovers* since, in addition to the share of the profits that he already received as a manager, the triumvirate allowed him the proceeds of his benefit nights – the third, the sixth and the ninth nights. He dedicated the published version to George I and received a reward of £500. Nevertheless, it represented the end of his association with Drury Lane. His plans to follow it with other plays came to nothing, and in 1724 he left London to live in Wales, where he died in 1729. His share in the theatre went to his daughters, as the patent had been drawn up to run for Steele's life plus three years, but the triumvirate knew that the clock was ticking. If they wanted to stay in business, they needed to get another patent by 1732.



## The end of the old order

**Fortunately for the triumvirate,** Colley Cibber had increased his already considerable stock of political leverage when, in 1730, he had been created Poet Laureate, an official, salaried, government position. Although we know nothing of the negotiations that lay behind it, a new patent was issued to Booth, Wilks and Cibber, to become effective for 21 years from 1 September 1732 – the day on which the Steele patent expired. The wording of the patent was almost the same as before, and it was assignable – that is to say, it could be traded. Booth, who hadn't acted since ill health forced his retirement in 1728, was the first to take advantage of this.

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\* Hazlitt called Steele's plays 'homilies in dialogue, in which a number of pretty ladies and gentlemen discuss... fashionable topics... with a sickly sensibility'. Quoted in Fitzgerald, p.413.

**In Rep: Plays Performed at Drury Lane During w/c 4 January 1725**

Date in brackets is year of first performance

Date of performance, *Play* and playwright

Monday 4 January, *The Plain Dealer* by William Wycherley (1676)

Tuesday 5 January, *King Lear* by William Shakespeare (1605)

Wednesday 6 January, *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare (1611)

Thursday 7 January, *The Careless Husband* by Colley Cibber (1704)

Friday 8 January, *Rule and Wife and Have a Wife* by Francis  
**Beaumont and John Fletcher** (1624) followed by *Harlequin Doctor  
Faustus* (1723)

Saturday 9 January, *Vertue Betray'd* by John Banks (1682)

Before the patent had even come into effect, in July 1732 he sold half of his one-third share for £2,500 to a gentleman called John Highmore who fancied himself as an amateur actor. He also appointed Highmore to manage the half-share which he retained. Then, in September, Robert Wilks died and his widow assigned the management of her share to John Ellys, a portrait painter. Cibber began to have doubts about whether he wanted to continue in partnership with two people, neither of whom had any experience of professional theatre, so he rented his own share to his son Theophilus for the 1732-33 season and put himself on a generous salary. Then in March 1733, before the season was over, Cibber sold his one-third share in the patent to Highmore for £3,000 guineas, giving Highmore 50 per cent of the patent and the management of the remaining half of the Booth share. Highmore was now in charge.

Theophilus Cibber was furious that his father had sold his share without even telling him or offering him the chance to acquire it, but then the relationship between the Cibbers, father and son, had always been terrible. Theophilus proposed to Highmore that he should be in charge of the company on Highmore's account, but Highmore refused and told Theophilus to leave at the end of the season. Theophilus Cibber was a difficult man who managed to upset almost everyone, and it seems he had already irritated Highmore sufficiently. He then drew up a plan of attack.

It seems that the actors at Drury Lane didn't much like the new management of the company by amateurs, and they were particularly upset that Highmore was negotiating with John Rich at Covent Garden to re-establish a cartel: neither theatre would employ actors from the other theatre, thus putting the managements into a very strong bargaining position with the actors, who would not be able to defect to the rival house. Theophilus persuaded the actors to rebel against the management in order to get better terms. His battle plan was simple but deadly: he knew that the new patentees did not have a formal lease on the building, so he negotiated with the building shareholders for a new lease to himself and the rebel actors. This would have left Highmore with a patent but no theatre in which to put on plays. Highmore found out about it and at midnight on Saturday 26 May 1733 he sent in the heavies to eject the rebel actors and barricade the theatre against them. The actors brought an action against the patentees for ejecting them from their own building but the case took months to reach the courts. Meanwhile, both sides kept up a barrage of pamphlets attacking each other and staking their claims to legality. In one of these documents, *A Letter from Theophilus Cibber, Comedian, to John Highmore Esq*, Cibber complained of the unfitness of Highmore and Ellys to run a theatre; brought up the cartel issue; then offered the patentees £1,200 a year if they would let the actors back into Drury Lane to run it for them. This offer was turned down.

On 24 September, Drury Lane re-opened with a scratch company drawn from the rag-tag-and-bobtail of the profession, semi-professionals and people who normally performed in fairground booths. The rebel actors, comprising almost every star name of the day, opened at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket two days later. This relatively tiny house, next to the site of the present Theatre Royal Haymarket, had been built by a carpenter called John Potter in 1720 and let to a visiting company of French actors sponsored by the Duke of Montagu. The theatre had no licence to operate so it was, strictly speaking, illegal, but the Duke's patronage seems to have been enough to get them through the first season. After that, it had been used for occasional performances by foreign companies, amateurs or scratch companies put together to

do a few shows. As long as they didn't do anything controversial, the authorities were prepared to turn a blind eye.

The position of the rebels at the Little Theatre was precarious and could only be temporary, as the house was too small to cover their running expenses, but the situation of the patentees at Drury Lane was worse. Only a handful of the original company had stayed with them, so there were problems with getting a cast together for any play. Standards were low and audiences were thin. Highmore was facing heavy losses. With things looking bleak all round, Barton Booth's widow decided to get rid of her remaining half of Booth's original one-third share, which she sold for £1,350.<sup>28</sup> The buyer was Henry Giffard, the manager of yet another 'illegal' theatre that had opened in a converted workshop in Goodman's Fields, Whitechapel. Giffard was operating precariously, always at risk of being shut down by the authorities, and seems to have wanted to go legitimate.

Highmore, increasingly desperate, tried to get the rebel actors arrested under the Vagrancy Act as 'rogues and vagabonds'. The case failed, but only on a technicality.<sup>‡</sup> On 12 November 1733 the action for possession of Drury Lane by the rebel actors was heard in King's Bench and was granted. The judge took the view that they held a valid lease on Drury Lane and were entitled to occupy it: the fact that they didn't have a patent or licence to perform was irrelevant to the consideration of the lease. With the rebels set to return from the Haymarket to Drury Lane, this was the end of the road for Highmore, who bailed out. He sold his 50% share of the patent to Charles Fleetwood for £2,250 – less than half of what he paid for it. Fleetwood also bought the one-third share originally allocated to Robert Wilks from his widow for £1,500, which meant that he owned the whole patent apart from the one-sixth share which Giffard had bought from Mrs Booth.<sup>29</sup> He immediately entered into negotiations with the rebels, and on 8 March 1734 they moved back to Drury Lane on vastly improved terms, with Theophilus Cibber as deputy manager. Fleetwood took on their lease.

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<sup>‡</sup> The brief for the patentees spoke of 'rogues *or* vagabonds', but the lawyers representing the rebels objected that the wording of the act was 'rogues *and* vagabonds'.