

The Stranger Next Door: Identity and Diversity on the Late Eighteenth-Century Stage

In chapter VII of *Northanger Abbey*, John Thorpe's supercilious literary criticism encapsulates a wide-spread jingoistic attitude shared by the English middle-class at the close of the eighteenth century. Referring to Frances Burney's well-known novel *Camilla*, the bombastic Thorpe proclaims, "[T]hat's the book; such unnatural stuff [...] I soon found it would not do; indeed I guessed what sort of stuff it might be before I saw it: as soon as I heard she [Burney] had married an emigrant, I was sure I would never be able to get through it." (Austen 32-33)¹ In Austen's vision, Thorpe's self-assured scorn is a parody of Britons' stalwart opposition to the pervasive and ever-growing presence of the "Other," here embodied by Britain's all-time arch-enemy, France, which came to prevail in the Hanoverian period.

Thorpe's pseudo-patriotic pride contextualises and literalises Britannia's long-standing contempt for her Gallic neighbour, increased first by the French Revolution and later by the Napoleonic victories. In a wider context, his xenophobia condenses the typically Georgian diffidence for the "Other," a complex and multi-layered social and cultural event, which constructed real butts of nationalist prejudice who embodied the diverse cultural discourses of the turn-of-the-century English episteme. In those years, popular mockery enmeshed for the first time with learned historiographic reconstructions (not rarely counterfeited) to found the myth of Anglo-Saxon supremacy which would form the basis of the British colonial empire.

In my opinion it is not coincidental that this process of (external) representation of who/what lay *outside* England's frontiers—a rather fluctuating borderline, comparable to a series of shifting geographic thresholds, as proven by the case of the neighbouring "Other" nations, Scotland and Ireland—was also concurrent with a search for self-defining *national* images, another contemporary cultural phenomenon which encompassed the drive for the reconstruction of "Merrie" England's historic past as well as its spectacular representation on stage. The late-Georgian fervour for historically-conscious stage design and costume resulted in elaborate antiquarian stagings (particularly of the Shakespearean history plays), whilst the grandiose scenotechnic effects satisfied a growing commercial demand for outlandish and picturesque settings.

My contention is that it is possible to catalogue these multiple and convergent constructions of "nationhood" and "diversity" in Hanoverian England in three overlapping main categories and several sub-categories, each of which I epitomize in one or more relevant metonymic cultural models, the three cultural categories being Self-Images, Regional Identities and, finally, Representations of the Other.

Originally, this paper was intended to discuss how British national identity formed and consolidated at the end the Eighteenth century. This process was accomplished through a twofold cultural mechanism that permitted the Britons to define themselves to themselves simultaneously *from the inside* (by means of the antiquarian movement, the performance of historical plays and Shakespearean stagings, especially of *Henry V*; the growing popularity historical painting; the birth of national literature, and the appearance of standard narratives of the history of England, such as David Hume's) and *from the outside* (through visual and/or textual juxtaposition with either close or distant peoples and nations, from neighbouring

¹ Although published posthumously in 1818, it is commonly assumed that *Northanger Abbey* was revised through the preceding years by Austen, and as such it well epitomizes the socio-cultural context of the last span of the XVIII century.

Scotland and Ireland, to, further afield, France, Holland and finally, approaching the new century, to Asia, Africa and the Americas). Although due to length limits it is impossible for me to substantiate my argument I thought I could discover a recurrent (and indeed, naive) pattern of established and rational groupings—based on cultural/anthropological/geographical/moral differences and similarities—which were expedient to divide “us” from “them”, native from aliens, diverse from similar, and ultimately, Self from Other.

The Gothic genre, wildly popular during the reign of George III, seemed to offer an excellent example of this taming and containing of Otherness. Both Gothic novels and dramas employed a well-defined array of stock characters and locations: in several of the most famous examples of the vogue (here I am thinking in particular of the works of Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis and their dramatic adaptations at the hands of James Boaden) villains and heroes inhabit distant, often Mediterranean, countries, suitably displaced on the temporal, geographical and even religious level. Evil, usurpation, and ruthless scheming are opportunely distanced from the eager British audiences, who are offered an ultimately reassuring formula of moral justice and vicarious pleasure. As Henry Tilney (somewhat over-simplistically) instructs the fanciful Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, “[r]emember the country and age in which we live. Remember that we are English: that we are Christian.... Charming as were all Mrs Radcliffe’s works, ... it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the midland countries of England, was to be looked for” (Austen 163 and 165).

However, as I proceeded with the reading of the better or lesser-known texts of exotica I had chosen to focus on for the present paper, it became clear that any analysis of the Georgian discourse of diversity was complicated by the presence of a set of liminal figures who were at one and the same time both alien *and* native, outsiders *as much as* insiders. I am referring to those British-born inhabitants of the overseas dominions, made affluent by the ruthless exploitation of colonial wealth, who finally decided to make their comeback home, followed by trains of servants and trunks, and generally accompanied by an ill-repute of moral impurity and exotic wiliness. All the more dangerously, in several of the popular representations I have examined, these characters returned home equipped with an imperial frame of mind, and thus prone to apply to the everyday world of domestic England the (otherwise discreetly sidestepped) rules of violent subjugation, social inequality and callous dominance on which the ill-got affluence of the home country was silently (and reticently) grounded. (We could here mention amongst the others such diverse works as Frances Sheridan’s *Sidney Bidulph*, 1761 Elizabeth Inchbald’s *The Wise Man of the East*, 1799 and Amelia Opie’s *Adeline Mowbray*, 1804. The subject of the returning Nabob was however recurrent throughout Romantic literature and it was still popular in 1826, as testified by the success of John Galt’s *The Last of the Lairds*, in which a wealthy and ostentatious Anglo-Indian merchant is finally outwitted by the hero.)

Whilst the popular cultural constructions of late-eighteenth century Otherness and the companion fabrications produced by the contemporary discourse of science, natural history and early racist anthropology represent visually and/or textually (and thus manage to isolate) diversity, the figures from which we may define the “home-coming” displace all clear-cut categorizations, bringing home the disruptive and core-level presence of strangeness. These icons of cultural hybridism offset early Western intellectual (as well as physical and economic) attempts at surveying and subjugating the alien. Significantly, their function is assimilable to the psychological mechanism known as “the return of the repressed” and to the (re)discovery of the unfamiliar as familiar, accompanied as it is by the realization that not only the Other *is*, but also openly *professes* its rights to be, the Same.

Accordingly, the returned incomers from the outskirts of the Empire dislocate, relocate and finally reinforce the Georgian resistance to and the anxiety for the Other as they run counter to the Enlightenment cultural and geographical mapping (and hence containment) of difference. When the fabrication of these figures gets coupled with their on-stage performance, British normalcy is forced to face its colonial Other, so that the mainstream comforting perception of rational order gives way to a threat of degeneracy and corruption, be it moral, social or even sexual.

The texts I have investigated in this latter part of my analysis share a common concern with the imported diversity of the outlandish home-comers and the various facets of disturbing difference they embody. In Samuel Foote's *The Nabob* (1772) the wealthy and hard-hearted Anglo-Indian protagonist plays havoc with the traditional social ordering of the British gentry. In Richard Cumberland's wildly successful *The West Indian* (1771), Belcour's easily-aroused animal spirits bring to the very heart of London the strong passions and implicitly over-sexualised nature which were perceived to characterize the British planters of the Caribbean. In Richard B. Sheridan's Kotzebueian reworking *Pizarro* (1799), the noble and savage Peruvians who withstand the Spanish invasion are fully Bricised and transformed into John-Bullish bulwarks against Napoleonic aggression. Finally, in Frances Burney's comedy *A Busy Day. An Arrival from India* (c. 1800-1), the figure of the Croesus-like Nabob is genderised and portrayed as the possible dupe of an unscrupulous London fortune hunter. In all of the above instances, the difficulties of cultural appropriation and incorporation of the Other are complicated by the contemporary attempts at enlisting the various regional identities of the peoples in George III's reign under the service of the fast-growing empire--seen as a unifying force towards national homogeneity--an embryonic political entity for which "a strong sense of dissimilarity from those without proved to be the essential cement" (Colley 17).

In Foote's *The Nabob* (Haymarket, 1772) the superimposed comic ending of the play does not manage to mask the threat posed by the Anglo-Indian officer of the East India Company who returns to his home country. Foote's comedy can be grouped along with several other texts which make up a significant sub-genre within the late-eighteenth-century literary scenario. Historically this so-called "anti-Nabob literature" (i.e. cultural products intended to describe and expose the despotic practices of the returned East India Company employees), belongs to the 1780s and 1790s, two decades in which the problems inherent to colonial management became of paramount importance in British social life. In 1784 William Pitt's India Bill transferred military control as well as several other powers back to the state, thus bringing about the end of the East India Company's hegemony. Only four years later, in 1788 the beginning of the trial for the impeachment of the ex-president of the East India Company and governor-general of Bengal, Warren Hastings, transformed the heretofore discreet relationships of British settlers and native East Indians into a matter concern to the public domain. The trial would go on for six years and it offered endless opportunities for display to the major orators and politicians of the time, who either sided with Hastings or accused the ex-governor for the duration of the whole debate. Hastings was indicted for having extorted large sums of money, bribed local noblemen, tainted British integrity and forsworn the public trust. In short, he stood accused of having become *acclimated* to the treachery, duplicity and avarice which in British popular imagination made up the stereotypical portrait of the Indian Moghuls. (Significantly, as we shall presently see, Richard Sheridan, who at the time of the Hastings' trial had reached the height of his political career, addressed repeatedly both jury and audience, indulging in a display of his already famous rhetorical and dramatic talents.)

As is the case with most anti-Nabob literature, Foote's former East India merchant Sir Matthew Mite has experienced and then chosen (scandalously) to embrace exotic diversity. (It is not coincidental that the contemporary medical discourse spoke of the "corrupting" influence of torrid zone climates.) (Nussbaum) The possibility of fast financial gain and effortless social climbing Sir Matthew has been offered by colonial exploitation has disclosed to him that neither England's culture nor its social structure and laws are immutable constructs. Armed with this new awareness, he has returned home fully intending to challenge and eventually overturn all time-honoured notions of established order and the fundamental values of English society.

In his ruthless campaign of subjugation, Foote's Mite allies with a motley array of seedy members from British politics and law. His attorney, Mr. Rapine, has no second thoughts in swindling the light-headed representative of the gentry, Sir Oldham, nor have the corrupt local constituents more scruples in securing themselves a seat in the forthcoming elections through bribery. In point of fact, Mite's artful connivance and cunning have made an alliance with the corrupting forces which are already destabilizing England's welfare from the inside, and thus they have brought to light the barbarous and the savage lurking in the corners of their allegedly enlightened mother country. As stated by two characters in play, the cunning of the Nabobs does not place them on a footing with the treacherous Turks or the blood-thirsty Tartars, rather it manages to catch out the Tartar *in the Briton* (II.ii)).

Once returned "inside the pale," Foote's Nabob proceeds to break all the time-honoured links between property and propriety on which the English social structure was founded: he slowly purchases aristocratic country seats, he bribes his way into politics and he is finally set to have legal access to nobility through buying off in marriage the daughter of a spendthrift baronet. (Obviously, casting requirements imposed the audience's favourite comedian Samuel Foote to play the leading role in the play, thus greatly limiting his portrayal of the truly grim aspects of Mite's character.)

Mite's final words sound prophetic, as he scornfully takes his leave from the narrowly-escaped Oldhams: the wealth of the East loses the taint linked to its source once liberally dispensed in gifts, acquisitions and patronage, so that if only artfully gentrified, moral evil can be no longer clearly recognized. In this sense, Foote's *The Nabob* in particular and anti-Nabob literature in general appear to blur the conventional sub-generic boundaries which would be later codified by Romantic and early Victorian melodrama. As a matter of fact, the anti-Nabob narratives offer hardly recognizable versions of evil, so that "the sense of purgation that comes with the providential defeat of the villain who threatens the home" (Holder 129) cannot be experienced any longer. The division of good and evil along racial/ethnic lines is further complicated by the fact that the functions of acknowledged villain and alleged hero (by birth), rather than being separated, overlap in one and the same figure. Foote's Sir Matthew Mite can be read as both the Self and the Other; he is allowed to embody the British (colonizer) as long as he remains relegated to India, but once returned home he becomes an interloper, as he takes on that most fearful role, the colonizer colonized.

Mite rides high the far-reaching economic and social change that England was experiencing in that revolutionary period of its history. Further implications of his mainland campaign that the light-hearted tone of the comedy is allowed only to sketchily hint at refer to domestic gendered hierarchies and the politics of sexual relations. Not only does Mite affirm to have in mind the founding of a seraglio in London, his bottomless wealth has also convinced him that a few well-placed jewels can buy him the company of any respectable woman in town. He coldly considers his alliance with Miss Oldham only as the finishing touch to his proper entrance into London fashionable society. As he explains to his artful procuress, Mrs. Match'em, "Why, you don't suppose that I am prompted to this project by

passion? [...] No, I only wanted a wife to complete my establishment, just to adorn the head of the table" (II.ii). It appears thus likely that the ruthless campaign of "large territorial acquisition in England" (I.i) Mite is set out on would also involve the introduction of Eastern despotism and immorality in the very heart of the English domestic realm.

Even more dangerously, the comedy seems to imply that the future domestic relations at the Mites' are bound to mirror and duplicate the colonial relations between native and settlers, overseas slaves and masters. Accordingly, veiled allusions to gradual abolitionism and moderate feminism seem to surface in Foote's farce, thus aligning the text to those later works from the 1780s and 1790s that "question the desirability of importing colonial goods, modes of knowledge, and social attitudes back into Britain" (Trumpener 168). As argued by critic Katie Trumpener in her recent influential analysis of the relations between Romantic novel and Empire, the middle part of George III's reign was a period in which "everyone in Britain begins to be affected, in quotidian but important ways, by colonial coming and goings, profits and losses, and by the change of situation and character they produce" (Trumpener 174)

A further important facet of the discourse of diversity as articulated and regulated by late-Georgian drama is the staging of the then well-established scientific connection of the exotic with the erotic. Enlightenment natural histories and anthropological studies concocted a pseudo-scientific and excessively-sexualised image of the women of the empire which in its turn collaborated with the construction of the figure of the ardently passionate colonizer, whose inordinate sexual desire was caused by the intense heat he experienced at the tropics. (Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767) makes a good case in point, and so does *An Inquiry into the Colonial Policy of the European Powers* (1802). Cumberland's *The West Indian* (Drury Lane, 1771) is a comical portrayal of how Belcour's flamboyancy, egotism and typically exotic sensual unruliness are tamed, domesticated and befittingly sentimentalised by his encounter with Louisa Dudley's personification of English womanhood. In this sense, the regimentation of exotic sexuality is crucially linked to the turn-of-the-century discourse of national identity, as only Western decent monogamy was able to ensure legitimate children, and thus the legal transmission of property. As contended by Felicity Nussbaum in her discussion of Opie's *Adeline Mowbray*, only "marriage, in spite of the gendered hierarchies and unfair property relations that ensue, is equated with European civilization. To disrupt these relations is to ally oneself with the 'savage'" (Nussbaum 42).

Although he presents his hero as a "wild" (I.iv) planter ruled by passions and prone to fall in love at first sight, by the denouement of the story Cumberland has managed to transform the returned planter's stereotypical high-spending and "not quite unexceptional moral" (Cumberland 168) into sentimental disregard of money, and then to vindicate the young man's natural generosity by blaming the impetuosity of his character on (sexual) geography, "Oh, Sir, if this is folly in me, you must rail at Nature: you must chide the sun, that was vertical at my birth, and would not wink upon my nakedness, but swaddled me in the broadest, hottest glare of his meridian beams" (III.i). The discourse of sensibility clearly appears in the playwright's explanation of the ideological reasons behind his vindication of the exotic.

I still fancied there was ... an opportunity for showing at least my goodwill to mankind, if I introduced the characters of persons, who had been usually exhibited on stage, as the butts for ridicule and abuse, and endeavoured to present them in such lights, as might tend to reconcile the world to them, and them to the world. I thereupon looked into society for the purpose of discovering such as were the victims of its national, professional or religious prejudices; in short for those suffering characters, which stood in need of an advocate (Cumberland 157)

Belcour's high animal spirits are thus recodified into good-heartedness, benignity and the desire to relieve the needy, and he is presented as an exotic specimen whose improper impetuosity requires to be tamed, reformed, and eventually made rational by English sensibility and hospitality: in respect of the widespread naturalistic determinism of the age, in the final act of the play the young man declares himself all too willing to be assimilated to his mother country's climate. Consequently, once Belcour's trial is over and he is allowed to recognize his natural father in the honest merchant Stockwell, he is awarded a double identity, both *personal* (familiar) and *national* (as proven by his request of reform):

Stock: How happily has this evening concluded, and yet how threatening was its approach! [...] I have discovered through the veil of some irregularities, a heart beaming with benevolence, an animated nature, fallible indeed, but not incorrigible; and your election of this excellent young lady makes me glory in acknowledging you to be my son. (V.viii)

Through this textual device, Cumberland manages to deflate the potential sexual destabilization embodied by the returning planter, and thus to offer an exorcism of his diversity via a humanitarian vindication of his integrity and fundamentally virtuous character.

In similar fashion, the figure of the cruel and canny colonist exposed in anti-Nabob literature is complicated and reversed in Sheridan's turn-of-the-century reworking of Kotzebue's *Die Spanier in Peru oder Rollas Tod* (Drury lane, 1799). In the Irish dramatist's version, the by-then established moral hierarchy of settlers and settled is inverted. Pizarro is portrayed as the callous, sadistic, and barbarous enforcer of Western colonial practices, whilst the outlandish Peruvians he tries to subjugate through violence and ferocity are represented in the guise of noble savages, the sustainers of liberty and virtue, happy to live in mutual peace and in respect of God's will. Their rallying cry, "Victory or death! our King! our Country! our God!" (II.ii) perfectly voices the loyalist sentiments of a nation like England which had been for decades at arms to defend the freedom of its inhabitants.²

This crucial reversal in the characters' functions (according to which the Western colonizer takes on the role of a savage and brutal representative of evil) is further complicated by its intersection with the discourses of American independence and the French revolution, topics which were repeatedly addressed by Sheridan in his parliamentary speeches. Thus the basely-born Spanish conqueror Pizarro, lord of the New World, is described as a self-appointed dictator in the style of Napoleon (the ruler of Europe) and his eventually-punished villainy and despotism illustrate Sheridan's political belief that any form of government founded on injustice and murder is sooner or later bound to collapse. In the figure of the Spanish tyrant he conflated the crimes of both the shamed English colonist Hastings and the Gallican arch-enemy Napoleon, imagined respectively as the traitor of and the threat to English liberty and rule. Significantly, in his edition of John Philip Kemble's promptbook, Charles Shattuck notes that the oratory of the Peruvian chief Rolla had its source in Sheridan's harangue against the governor-general of Bengal. Later, when in 1803 Napoleon renewed his assault against Britain, the dramatist "used Rolla's speech in an address to the Surrey volunteers" (Shattuck iii). (On its first performance, Rolla's battle oration had originally drawn a burst of applause that lasted over five minutes) (Donohue 138)

Sheridan's life-long committed parliamentary defence of human rights and the English constitution was thus dramatized in a play that enjoyed an excellent opening run of

² The success of the play is demonstrated by the gross profits made by Drury Lane Theatre; Donohue maintains that it 'grossed £13,624 from its thirty-one nights the first season, a figure amounting to one-fourth of the season's total takings.' (Donohue 364).

thirty-one nights. The audience enthusiastically responded to Rolla's heroic address to his fellow-Peruvians, and the overtly political overtones of the plot and its appeal to patriotism - indicated also by the presence of the King himself amongst the applauding crowd (Donohue 136; Price 630) were fully shared by the audience. In *Pizarro* geographical and historical displacement hardly veil the identification the self-determining, liberty-respecting Britons were prompted to feel with a manifestation of ennobled Golden Age diversity, heroically ready to withstand any form of foreign oppression and the threat of barbarism that spread across the sea.

In this sense, both the figures of the returning Nabob and the anglicised version of Peruvian noble savage illustrate the complexities of the turn-of-the-century dialectics between "Self" and "Other." British colonialism could not be simplistically portrayed as a short-hand for benign mercantilism, nor did its agents only intend to bring the light of civilization to the barbarous and primitive (as well as grateful) peoples of the Empire. Often difference and alienness could be discovered right at the heart of the English society, and conversely, narratives of distant civilizations were able to elicit the strongest feelings of sympathy and identification in the sensitive bosoms of the London audience. Although (national) identity can define itself to itself only against other images, it could however be assumed, as Homi Bhabha has argued, that "the 'other' is never outside or beyond us; it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse when we think we speak most intimately and indigenously 'between ourselves'." (Bhabha 4)³ Developing alongside (but also departing from) the pre-Romantic and Romantic love of diversity and cult of primitivism, the outlandish Britons of the late Eighteenth-century stage thus dismantle British insular self-conceptions, they represent a coming to terms with intra-national cultural difference and at the same they anticipate the long shadows cast by the mid-nineteenth-century theories of hegemony and empire.

Francesca Saggini
Università degli Studi della Tuscia, Italy

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