

Brotherly Love? Dr Young among the Thespians

Edward Young (Winchester 1695–1702; matriculated New College 1702) was once known as the poet of *Night Thoughts*, the most-quoted piece of graveyard poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He is now as little considered in that role as he is as a dramatist, author of the highly popular *Revenge* (1721); and also of a play with a patchier history: his version of Corneille's tragedy *Persee et Demetrius*, which he called *The Brothers*.

He wrote it in 1723, and it was about to be put on at Drury Lane when, in 1724, Young abruptly withdrew it, convinced that, as he stated in a letter to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, 'when acted, it will not more than pay for the paper on which it is written'. Sidney Lee's account in *The Dictionary of National Biography* (1900) claims that his motive was concern about the imminence of his taking orders, but Harold Forster's biography—still the only one in existence—attributes it instead to the rival popularity of John Rich's pantomime at Lincoln's Inn Fields.¹

In 1752, however, he got it out again, and showed it to Garrick, who seems to have been thrilled at the prospect of first dibs on a work by such a famous author. Young's proposal neatly united his two careers: the play would be performed, but the profits were to go to The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Recent box office receipts for a revival of *The Revenge* may have suggested to Young that this would raise about £1000. The production was fraught, however; Young, always a nervy author, came into frequent conflict, by her own account, with the leading lady, George Anne Bellamy, who later claimed in her memoirs that, among other disagreements, she had persuaded him to strike out the line, 'I will speak to you in thunder,' on the grounds that it was unladylike.

The British Library has a microfilm of what appears to be Young's production copy of the manuscript of *The Brothers*: the text is not in his hand, but the marginal annotations are.² There is, alas, no sign of the offending line, neither extant nor eliminated, but she certainly gets some stirring speeches, which to a modern eye look just as 'swelling':

Am I fair?
Am I a Princess? Love & Empire mine?
No, here I stand a naked shipwreck'd Wretch,
Cold, trembling, pale, spent, helpless, hopeless, mad,
Cast on a Strand, which, Rocks too steep to climb
Hang o'er; the stormy Sea comes roaring in
In mountain-Billows, sending menace loud
Before it, to confound, e'er it destroys.

Young has, however, crossed out a line in another speech, which could have seemed too violent—'When murder rages, Graves yawn, Ravens scream'—but his excising pen has fallen most savagely on an extremely dull speech of stoic suicide, in which the word 'wretched' fails twice to make an effect:

When I let loose a Sigh, I'll pardon thine.
Take my Example, and be bravely wretched.
True Grandeur rises from surmounted Ills,
The wretched only can be truly great.

His annotations are elsewhere primarily confined to the single word, 'Flourish'.

¹ Harold Young, *The Poet of the Night Thoughts, Edward Young (1683–1765)* (Alburgh, 1986).

² British Library, Western Manuscripts RP 347/2.

The real row, however, was occasioned by the epilogue. Young had written a decorous history lesson, explaining that though the wicked Perseus seemed to have triumphed over his virtuous brother Demetrius—described as ‘benignly bright, as stars to Mariners’—he would in fact get his comeuppance later:

Thrown headlong down, by Rome in triumph led,
For this night’s deed his perjur’d bosom bled:
His brother’s ghost each moment made him start,
And all his father’s anguish rent his heart.

Garrick replaced this with an epilogue which he had independently commissioned from David Mallet, which, spoken by Kitty Clive (who must have taken the role of Delia, the heroine’s faithful maidservant), enraged Young with its ‘coarse obscenity’. His exception to the tone may have been compounded by this version’s revelation of his charitable intentions; Canfield, in her discussion of the play, suggests that it was because ‘sprightly Kitty Clive . . . loved to give coarseness all its point’, but this is contradicted by her unusually spotless reputation.³ The objectionable speech runs as follows:

To woman, sure, the most severe affliction
Is, by these fellows, point-blank contradiction.
Our bard, without – I wish he would appear –
Ud! I would give it him – but you shall hear –
 “Good sir!” quoth I – and curtsied as I spoke –
“Our pit, you know, expects and loves a joke –
‘Twere fit to humour them: for, right or wrong,
Thru Britons never like the same thing long.
Today is fair – they strut, huff, swear, harangue: -
Tomorrow’s foul – they sneak aside and hang:
Is there a war – peace! Peace! Is all their cry:
The peace is made – then, blood! They’ll fight and die.”
 Gallants, in talking thus, I meant no treason:
I would have brought, you see, the man to reason.
But with some folks, ‘tis labour lost to strive:
A reasoning mule will neither lead nor drive.
He humm’d, and haw’d; then, waking from his dream,
Cry’d, I must preach to you his moral scheme.
A scheme, forsooth! To benefit the nations!
Some queer, odd whim of pious propagation!
Lord! Talk so, here – the man must be a widgeon: -
Drury may propagate – but not Religion.
 Yet, after all, to give the Devil his due,
Our author’s scheme, though strange, is wholly new:
Well, shall the novelty then recommend it?
If not from liking, from caprice befriend it.
For drums and routs, make him a while your passion,
A little while let virtue be the fashion:
And spite of real or imagined blunders,
Ev’n let him live, nine days, like other wonders.

³ Dorothea Frances Canfield, *Corneille and Racine in England: A Study of the English Translations of the two Corneilles and Racine, with Especial Reference to their Presentation on the English Stage* (London, 1904).

The lines which caused Young particular offence were, of course, the ones about propagation, but it cannot have been comfortable to have both his chosen charity, and its name, held up for ridicule. There must, too, have been a danger that the epilogue would eclipse the play: Clive was famous for comedy, not tragedy, and though Mallet emphasises the fickleness of the playgoing public, he also suggests that it likes best to be contradictory. His prediction came true: *The Brothers* only raised £400, rather than the anticipated £1000, and never made it to the ninth day author's benefit night. Garrick, however, made it the eighth, and final, night instead, and Young made up the remaining £600 out of his own money, so the Gospel was able to propagate after all. Young's biographer says firmly, 'The play has never been performed again', and adds that as it turns out to be a translation, rather than a dramatic re-writing of Livy, 'we may be excused from a critical consideration of a piece that is not only an imitation but quite, quite dead'.⁴

Not so, however: there is evidence that having been banished from the public stage, it found a new life in schoolboy theatricals. Among the published works of Hannah More is 'A Prologue to Dr. Young's tragedy of *The Brothers*, acted by the young Gentlemen of the Grammar School in Bristol, 1774. Spoken by Master Dickenson, of Redruth, in Cornwall, in the Dress of a Soothsayer' and 'An Epilogue to the same, spoken by Master Gwatkin', and in MS 142 in the Fellows' Library, Winchester College (containing the life in poetry of Thomas Le Mesurier, Winchester College 1769–1774; New College BA 1778, MA 1782, BD 1813) is an epilogue written by Le Mesurier when he was a boy in College, the scholars' house, for a performance of *The Brothers* in 1773.

Thanks to Thomas Arnold, we know something about how these thespian efforts actually looked. He was at Winchester a little later, from 1807–10, but a letter he wrote to his guardian and aunt, Mrs Delafield, on 22 April 1809, vividly describes the transformation of his 'chamber'—one of the medieval rooms in which the scholars lived and worked—into a theatre:

The Stage was compos'd of Chests cover'd with the Rugs from the Beds, & in Front with some richly-embroider'd Cloth for a good Effect. Now in every Chamber there is a Post in the middle, which whether intended as a Support to the Ceiling, or for any other Purpose, was extremely serviceable on the present Occasion. – This being in a direct Line with the Fireplace, a Piece of String was fastne'd from this to the Sconce over the Grate, at a convenient Height, and on this other Rugs were hung which were not pull'd up like the Curtain in the Theatre, but obliquely like those to a Bed from Side to Side. This veil'd the Front; and Curtains being in like Manner extended from the Post to the other Part of the Room, an Angle of the Chamber was thus allotted for the Representation. At the back of the Stage there were other Curtains about a yard from the Wall, which was the place for the Actors to retire to, when not on the Stage. The Praefects had their Seats on two Forms in Front; the Inferiors sat on the Tops of Beds & other elevated Situations behind. – I & one or two more sat on the Ground in front of the Praefects & had thus as good a View as possible. I am afraid I have not after all my Accuracy given you a good Idea of the Arrangement of our little Theatre: but this I can justly say, the plan was admirably suited to the Convenience of every one, & every thing was conducted with the utmost Order & Regularity.⁵

There is, alas, no equivalent account of the arrangements at Bristol Grammar School, which had relocated by 1774 to Gaunt's Hospital mansion house in Unity Street, but perhaps as a day school they had access to a slightly more communal, less domestic space. Hannah More's prologue and epilogue give little away about the circumstances of performance. We learn from the 'Soothsayer's prologue' that there are ladies present—"The oracle declares, to crown our toil |

⁴ Young, *Poet of the Night Thoughts*.

⁵ Taken from *Dr Arnold as a Winchester Boy: Letters from College, 1807–1810* (Winchester, 1932). The originals are also in Winchester College Fellows' Library.

With rich reward, each lady here shall smile’—and, though pressed into service as a metaphor for hope, the epilogue suggests that there is a painted canvas backdrop:

Oh! how the gay fantastic scene deceives!
In perspective how fair the picture lies!
Approach – the beauties vanish from your eyes;
For what at proper distance seem’d so fair,
Is rude plain canvas when you view it near.

Her overall trope is ‘an ancient apophthegm for modern use,’ that ‘human life’s a play’, and her emphasis is not on the tragedy that has just been performed, but on the parallels between the theatre and education. She is, however—as a writer of school plays herself—conscious of the need to think of the author, not, as Mallet and Clive’s epilogue does, to mock him, but to ensure that his intentions are honoured:

Howe’er we differ, let us join in this,
To bear in mind the *Author of the piece*.
The parts himself allotted let us act,
True to his meaning, to his sense exact.

There is a suggestion, too, that she is aware of the public reception of the play, as the description of vilification seems rather worldly for a mere school production:

. . . though the catcall Envy fill the pit,
Though Malice lurk behind the mask of Wit,
Though loud misjudging galleries may blame . . .

She ends conventionally enough, however, with the sentiment that ‘if you cry plaudite, we wish no more’.

The final speech of Young’s tragedy, made by King Philip of Thebes, also in fact employs the theatre as metaphor, but while More tames it into moral didacticism (‘The *prompter Conscience* warns us to return’), Le Mesurier breaks the spell by bringing the slain hero Demetrius back to sprightly life again. Young writes:

My Life’s deep Tragedy was planned with Art,
From Scene to Scene advancing in distress,
. . .
Tremble, ye Parents, for the Child you love;
For your Demetrius, mine is doom’d to bleed
A Guiltless Victim for his Father’s Deed.

In the Winchester production, however, Demetrius pops back on stage, and lightly satirises the play, the audience, and the whole notion of an epilogue. He begins:

I, who all Rome’s great Virtues did inherit
Want not, you may be sure, its public Spirit.
An Epilogue was wanted – and they all
For Succour on Demetrius seemed to call; -
I therefore, as obsequious as they would,
Myself here offer for the public Good,
Again for them to spend a little Breath

“A Ghost unblest here burst the Bars of Death”
Nor tremble singly to address you here,
Who rout whole Troops, and make ten Armies fear.

There are clearly ‘ladies’ in this audience too—perhaps they were permitted to sit on the prefects’ forms—and Le Mesurier thanks them for coming to the College on an Assembly Night:

Should we thus treat you, who to hear us speak
Both Beaux and Ball most kindly could forsake?

His speaker is strongly characterised, and you can hear the schoolboy’s bid for sophistication in his parody of other epilogues:

Tis not my Learning that would please you now,
But smart Address, and now and then a Bow.
With humble Tone I should request your Favours,
And beg you’d think we’ve done our best Endeavours: –
Protest our very Life is in your Pow’r,
In short say all you’ve heard so oft before: –

The speech neatly returns, however, to the text of the play, referring back both to his rivalry with his brother which forms the core of the action, and to his father’s last words:

. . . a very Roman as I am,
I’ve learn’d to value Life much less than Fame.
For this howe’er I’ve strove, whate’er I’ve done
Still to approve or not is yours alone. –
Deny not then what will rejoice us so –
What yet will cost you nothing to bestow –
This too great Philip’s grief swoln Heart will ease –
Nor Perseus’ self will envy me this Praise.

Fifty years, therefore, after Young first created the play, *The Brothers* lived again, and in the place where he was first encouraged to write. In Winchester, apparently, nothing is ever quite as dead as it seems.

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