The Puppet Show Conundrum: Haywood and the “Fittest Entertainment for the Present Age”

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IN VOLUME TWO, book twelve of *The Female Spectator*, Eliza Haywood presents a “satire upon the *Puppet* patrons” allegedly composed and truncated by the correspondent, “J.J.” Written as farce, this seemingly slight piece contains two parodic theatrical scenes that lampoon puppet shows. However, the presentation of these “satires” is itself satirical, and appears to figure the decline of popular taste. The piece offers some sly insight into the period’s ambivalent reaction to the puppet show’s popularity and, surprisingly, shows how puppet theatricals interrogated the hierarchy of literary genres. It is true that Haywood’s puppet satire is a critical spoof that does, in part, expand upon reflections on the decline of taste articulated by Henry Fielding in *The Author’s Farce*, a play that ironically implicates Haywood in such cultural decay. But the puppet satire in *The Female Spectator* moves beyond Fielding’s sense of social deterioration to a more nuanced understanding of puppet theater’s cultural and formal possibilities.

Haywood’s puppet satire is best seen in the context of the period’s broader ambivalence toward popular forms. Scholars who specialize in the early eighteenth century view the period as a time of enormous creativity, but many public intellectuals of that age did not. The decline of culture was often evinced by “debased” genres like the puppet show, and their popularity, which was mocked by the literati, represented a decline in education and, by extension, public taste: ‘once we had Shakespeare, now we have puppet theater’ was an opinion often voiced by the literary elite.

And yet, the puppet show was itself a satirical, and thus relatively sophisticated, genre: lowbrow, certainly, but difficult to deny and occasionally aspirational. Though it was the heyday of Punch, versions of Fielding’s plays, including *The Covent Garden Tragedy*, were also adapted for puppet theatricals. Actor
and puppeteer Charlotte Charke staged versions of The Beggars Opera, Moliere, and Shakespeare—including, apparently, a version of Henry IV with Punch as Falstaff (Speaight 104).

Such performances certainly suggest the puppet show’s creative and cognitive promise, but scorn of the puppet show was standard fare, and the form’s occasional aspiration to become Shakespeare only increased this anxiety. Echoing many, David Garrick wrote in 1744, “The Punch of a Puppet Shew, and the Heroe of a Theatre, are as different in their characters as the materials they are each compos’d of” (25). The puppet show commonly served as a trope for the theater’s lowest potential. In 1743, Ralph James wrote, “You have seen how Machinery, decoration, and such like extrinsic Additions have enervated the drama, and reduced the Stage, to a level with a Puppet-Show” (62). This contempt was longstanding. In 1715, Thomas Burnet published two editions of A Second Tale of a Tub; or the History of Robert Powel the Puppet-Show-Man. Though the majority of this text uses the puppeteer Robert Powell as a political stand-in for Robert Walpole, Burnet’s work associates both Powell and his Punch Theatre with modern pretense and cultural decay. Burnet acidly writes, “As for Punch, who used heretofore to be nothing but a roaring, lewd, rakish, empty Fellow, he now speaks choice Apothegems and sterling Wit, to the Amazement of the applauding Audience, both in Pit and Boxes” (xxvii).

As Burnet’s comments suggest (“Mr. Powel’s matchless Puppet-Show, which does enough recommend itself to all sagacious Readers, especially those of a Dramatick Genius”), the idea that a puppet show might hold cultural value was usually met with contempt (xxvii). Nevertheless, the puppet show was not mocked by all satirical writers in the early eighteenth century. As it does today, puppetry acted as a flexible trope. The puppet show as a dramatic form had been employed in political satire in pamphlets like the 1742 Politicks in Miniature: or, the Humours of Punch’s Resignation. A Tragi-comi-farcical-operatical Puppet-show. Spectator No. 277 used Martin Powell’s puppets as a trope for fashionable French women. In Spectator No.14, one of Richard Steele’s letter-writing personas favorably compares a satire of Italian Opera performed at Powell’s Punch Theatre to its source. Though the praise is clearly ironic—Steele later suggests in Spectator No. 372 that Powell’s actors, both “flesh and blood” and “wood and wire,” might make charitable donations to offset their moral destructiveness—the attention points to the puppet theater’s potency, popularity, and cultural currency. Critical assessments of puppet shows tended to censure their desire to elevate themselves to the level of more admired cultural forms. The Spectator pieces depicting well-known figures sneaking out of performances also make it clear that puppet-show anxiety was related to the form’s expanding appeal as a guilty pleasure for its own readers and members of the upper class, which helps to explain its satirical appearance in The Female Spectator. The first periodical written by a woman for a female audience, this periodical ran from April 1744 to May 1746 and was modeled after The Spectator, which it frequently mocked. It offered equally
sophisticated urban cultural satire, and was likewise centered on a series of recurring mock-personas. As with *The Spectator*, it dispensed moral advice on contemporary issues. Even more than *The Spectator*, it tended to scold with a wink; many of the entries offered subtle counter-readings to their overtly didactic texts.

One might initially ask if the puppet show, for Haywood, offers any value at all as a form of social satire and theater, except as a figure for derision. A rapid reading of the relevant section of Book 12 of *The Female Spectator* might suggest that the answer is “no.” Despite her history in contemporary theater, Haywood reproduces the standard criticisms about its state in volume one of *The Female Spectator*; she complains about its frivolity and laments the lack of Shakespearean productions (153). Pettit aptly points out a similar phenomenon in Haywood’s 1735 work of theater criticism, *The Dramatic Historiographer*: Haywood ignores the plays of the 1730s of which she was a part, and affirms a conservative canon (2). She is extremely sensitive to charges of immorality, and claims that her critique of the theater is “calculated to prevent the Reader from losing Sight of the original and most laudable View of such Entertainments, that of inculcating Virtue, and inspiring a Horror for Vice” (366). In many ways, this puppet satire in *The Female Spectator* seems to follow suit; Haywood appears anxious to distance herself from a lowbrow culture in which she had played a part.

As King and Pettit point out in their footnote, the inspiration for the piece seems to have been a particular puppet show staged at Hickford’s Great Room by a Mr. Russel; Charlotte Charke, one of the puppeteers, writes later about the elaborate nature of this puppet show, including the fact that some of the puppets seem to have been adorned with real diamonds lent by wealthy women (469n). Charke had fairly high regard for the puppet shows that she was involved in, referring to one of them as “the most elegant that was ever exhibited” (120). Additionally, this particular puppet show was a familiar conceit for Haywood, since, like *The Opera of Operas*, it, too, was a parody of Italian Opera.

Haywood’s own parody of Mr. Russel’s puppet show, if such it is, “stars” Mr. *Mollman* as a would-be puppeteer. The scene opens with a Mr. *Townly* investigating Mollman’s “scheme” to mock fashionable London that is apparently “the Talk of every Company one goes into” (420). The effeminate Mollman claims, “Why, my Dear, there is not a Face in the City of any Note, but what is to be taken off to the Life in my Puppet-Shew.” Mr. Townly replies, “The Ladies, I suppose, encourage it, as a Satire upon our Sex, to shew, that they think the Men of this Age little better than Puppets” (421). The stupidity of this analogy is intentional, but Townly goes on to suggest in a more biting way that “perhaps, they may have our Stage-Entertainments in view, which they may not judge quite as rational as a Puppet-Shew.” And, presumably, Russel’s piece is directly targeted when Townly speculates that “perhaps, both they and the Men may be of the Opinion, that no Actors can so well supply the Want of Italian Singers as Puppets” (421). Although puppet shows
were certainly associated with lower-class mockery, one of the most interesting aspects of Haywood’s satire is the focus on upper-class taste: Mollman is plotting to satirize fashionable London to a fashionable audience, and Russel’s puppet show presumably did the same. As Mollman says:

Oh! Aye—They are so delighted.—Lud! they have no other Pastime;—no other Enjoyment.—Gad’s Curse! My little Rogue, I can do any thing with them.

Town. And they with you, I suppose, without any Danger to their Reputations?

Moll. You may be as satirical as you will, but the little Devils can’t live without me, my Dear. (Chucking him under the chin.) (421)

Although this brief scene is meant to be dimwitted—as are both Mollman and Townly—it furtively suggests at least two ways that puppet shows might function as an effective lampoon by reducing other forms to its own level. Though the piece mocks the puppet theater, it effectively deploys clichés from the general milieu of contemporary theater: Townly leaves Mollman with the phrase, “Farewell, Coxcomb, or rather Knave” (421). The real clue to this dialogue, however, occurs in the course of what seems to be an offhand joke. Townly asks, “So, I find, you are going to revive, as it were, the old Comedy in a Puppet-Shew?” Mollman responds: “Gad’s Curse, I don’t know what you mean by old Comedy,—but look you here, my pretty little Precious!—here’s a Curiosity—(shewing a large Puppet) observe, my Dear,—this is Alderman Brawn—as like as two P’s” (421). Townly’s suggestion that Mollman might be reviving a respected classical mode is met with a buffoonish response. The puppet show cannot operate as a contemporary version of Aristophanes precisely because of Mollman’s cultural and historical ignorance of the form in which he participates. And yet, the joke invites the comparison: What has satire been reduced to? What is contemporary humor’s relationship to more esteemed versions? How low can it go?

Potentially, it can go even lower than the puppet show: “J.J.,” the alleged author lampooned for his supposed brilliance, claims that the scene will never be performed because the “fine Ladies and Gentlemen” have been diverted from their puppet patronage by the “profound Application to the important Solution of a Conundrum.” Conundrums were joke books containing witty riddles whose answers were released several months after the initial publication. Many were published in the 1740s. They contained jokes such as “Why is a crooked woman like a country-brown loaf? Because she is maid a-rye” (The Statesman’s Court Puzzle No. 50); “Why is a fart like a double entendre? Because it is taken in two senses” (No. 13); “Why is a fat man like a Cornish Borough? He seldom sees his member” (No. 95); “Why is a poet like a cat? Because of his muse” (No. 110). Haywood mocks the popularity of these joke books by declaring conundrums “the fittest entertainment for the present age” (424).
On the surface, the whole analogy is a silly send-up of fashionable taste that covers both gender and class, pointing out that there are also “Men-butterflies as well as Women...[who] suffer themselves to be blown about by every Wind of Folly.—Whatever has the Name of Novelty will carry them through thick and thin” (419). The piece implies that women are better-equipped than men to satirize a feminized social world, and Haywood actually uses men’s attraction to conundrums and puppet theater as proof that they are as frivolous and fashion-conscious as women—and, of course, mourns the dire state of contemporary culture as represented by the rise of cheap entertainment.

Nevertheless, Haywood suggests that this less-than-witty puppet-show play would have had the positive effect of shaming puppet theater had it been staged, and Euphrosine, one of Haywood’s personas in The Female Spectator, proceeds to develop a dramatis personae for a much more clever puppet show that is an effective send-up of the comic stage. This production would include “Sir Dubious Eitherway,” “Sir Necessary Matchlove,” and “a Punch to come in between every Scene, and explain the meaning to the audience” (423). This hypothetical performance would “turn the intended Satire on the City, entirely on the contrary Party, and make the mention of a Puppet-Shew hereafter more shocking to the Ear than Wormwood to the Palate” (424).

However, puppet theater seems particularly vexed for those, like Haywood, who worked across popular and elite genres and sought serious approval. Henry Fielding presents a related case in point. As Shershow and others have noticed, when—in Tom Jones 12:5—Tom laments the missing Punch and Joan from the too-serious puppet show, it probably reflected a real ambivalence about whether puppet shows themselves could cross this barrier (Shershow 178). Fielding made extensive use of the puppet-show metaphor in works like Jonathan Wild, and, notably, had parodied Haywood as “Mrs. Novel” in the pseudo-puppet play-within-a-play The Pleasures of the Town as part of The Author’s Farce (1730), with the puppets played by actors. The Pleasures of the Town mocks a variety of popular forms and formal purveyors through the Goddess of Nonsense’s courtship: Farce, Novel, Bookseller, Poet, Pantomime, Tragedy, and Opera. Specifically, in the puppet play, Haywood as Mrs. Novel competes with her mother, Nonsense, for the love of Italian Opera. And before the puppet play, the Player and Master have a discussion of literary form of the kind that Haywood takes up in The Female Spectator. “It is beneath the dignity of the stage,” says the player, speaking of the puppet show in which he is about to participate. The master responds: “That may be, so all is Farce, and yet you see a Farce brings more Company to a House than the best Play that ever was writ—for this Age would allow Tom Durfey a better Poet than Congreve or Wycherly, who would not then rather Eat by his Nonsense, than starve by his Wit.” The player replies, “I am not the first indeed that has graced the stage,” to which the Master responds, “And I heartily wish you may be
the last, and that my Puppet-Show may expel Farce and Opera, as they have done Tragedy and Comedy” (Fielding 28).

The puppet show, then, is placed low on the hierarchy of forms, but works, in some respects, as a substitute for higher forms due to a decline in taste and intelligence. In a sense, the purity of the puppet show is preferable to the pretense offered by other ‘pretending’ genres; it does not come with opera’s false claim of critical respectability. When a puppet first appears in *The Author’s Farce*, it sings:

> Whilst the Town’s brimful of Farces,  
> Flocking while we see her Asses  
> Thick as Grapes upon a Bunch  
> Criticks, while you smile on Madness  
> And more stupid, solemn Sadness,  
> Sure you will not frown on Punch. (29)

As Shershow puts it, “Fielding satirizes a situation in which the *agents* of textual or histrionic mediation—actors, booksellers, translators, and prompters—subvert the authority of the author even as both he and his theatrical surrogate wholeheartedly immerse themselves in the same marketplace they repeatedly allege has deformed the hierarchy of literary value” (148). This “deformation” is more like a race to the bottom—the bottom being a more honest, less pretentious representation of commercial reality as well as the taste of contemporary audiences and critics. This represents a sardonic reversal of contemporary criticism: rather than criticize the affront that puppet shows’ aspirations offer to public taste, puppet theaters might usefully expose the emptiness of other genres. Haywood’s *Female Spectator* piece, in part, takes the joke further: even puppet shows may be replaced with conundrums, and modern audiences will be too ignorant to understand what has been replaced.

Of course, Fielding was implicating Haywood as a progenitor of the problem. As Mrs. Novel, Haywood was involuntarily—but not necessarily bitterly, as Kathryn King points out in “Henry and Eliza: Feudlings or Friends”—a participant in an elaborate genre farce, in which the puppet show was simply one of a number of commercial, popular modes used for sophisticated ends. Fielding and Haywood had a variety of theatrical relationships as both collaborators and competitors: Fielding later hired Haywood as an actor in 1737 and wrote roles for her—not mocking her—in plays like *The Historical Register* and *Eurdice Hiss’d*. Haywood revives and rewrites a Fielding piece in *The Opera of Operas* that is also a parody of Italian Opera. As “Madame de la Nash,” Fielding himself was pseudonymously involved in puppet theater in 1748, and Colley Cibber mocked him three years after Haywood’s puppet piece by restaging *The Author’s Farce* with Fielding as the protagonist (Battestin 436). Such imbroglios suggest a substantial interest by Haywood and her contemporaries in a genre that could bring them shame by association. Fielding was certainly aware of
this paradox even before he actually oversaw his own puppet theater. The tone of *The Author’s Farce* is largely one of chagrin.

Haywood, too, is ambivalent in her puppet condemnation. Although her puppet satire appears to be indebted to *The Author’s Farce*, she moves the theoretical bar further than Fielding and his resigned sense of the commercial degradation of form. The appearance of Punch in the *Female Spectator* piece makes it clear that the more-clever satirical drama would itself be staged wholly or partially as puppet theater. Moreover, the character types and scenes described are simply funnier versions of theater types described in the earlier section. There is “Lord Lumpish, half asleep in an easy Chair, with the Calves of his Legs where Nature had placed his Ancles; one of his Arms hanging down like a Pump-Handle, and the other in his Bosom, with Lady Frolick pouring a Glass of Viper Wine down his Throat” (422–23). Euphrosine also lists standard issue scenes like “A VERY tragical, hyperbolical Scene between Lady Ample, and an old Earl, supposed to be at the Point of Death” (423). The comedy produced by these stereotypes of course suggests Haywood’s familiarity with them. Puppet theater becomes a stand-in for the state of the contemporary stage.

Superficially part of anti-puppet aggression, the comedy produced by both stupid and smart puppet-show spoofs clearly points to the actual comic potential of puppet satire. And, as with Fielding’s play, this piece leverages that comic potential, as well as the puppet metaphor. In other words, foolish puppet theater, perhaps guiltily enjoyed, gives rise to the secret desire for smart puppet theater. And—though a script does not seem to exist—the extravagant puppet show parody of the Italian Opera that Haywood is mocking was probably not completely witless; at the very least, it was likely to have been more clever than most of the generic theater clichés spoofed by Haywood.

While Haywood comments sardonically that bad jokes “may be the fittest entertainment for the present age,” the piece tacitly brings up the possibility that this may in reality be *true* for puppet-show theater. While attacking the author of the first puppet-show piece (“every Day affords fresh matter for a satiric Genius”), she writes:

> NEVER did any Age like this require a Juvenal;—Bury’d, as it were, in Luxury and Folly, gentle Strokes would have no Effect; the severest Lash of Satire should be employed, and dealt about impartially on all; for as all Modes, whether good or evil, are originally form’d by the great World, and gradually descend to their Inferiours, *there* must the Rectification begin, if we would hope to see any Amendment. (422)

So, puppet shows, and less-than brilliant satires thereof, may be a stupid satire for a stupid age—but a fitting one. That is, it is the appropriate satirical form to transmit the stupidity of the age and, as for Fielding, a flexible and evocative trope. As such, it is a sign of the times, but it is also deserving of a kind of grudging respect, or at least
an interest in improving the genre. Like other genres mocked or adopted by Haywood—as with Anti-Pamela, for example, or, obviously, The Spectator—it is a source of invention as well as dismissal. As is so often the case for Haywood, she gets to have it both ways: scolding upper-class London for its cheap taste while concurrently relishing the potential for puppet-show satire to hit its mark.

Haywood’s analysis of the origin of modes also suggests the intense self-awareness writers in the period held about the relationship between, and malleability of, genres and modes. Form follows culture, not the reverse. On the one hand, this has formal consequences: satire, or any other mode, evolves in relation to social developments. Puppet theater is simply the latest development in the evolution of genres, a process that occurs in concert with commerce and public taste.

On the other hand, it is useless to blame the media. Every era gets the satire it deserves. The crass humor of puppet shows and conundrums lays bare the true nature of society and eschews the pretense of other new and objectionable forms. Puppet shows may have been seen as a guilty pleasure, but the clever ones might also comfortably take their place alongside the Goddess of Nonsense’s other debased popular genres—like the novel.

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WORKS CITED


