

TRICK UPON TRICK; OR, METHODISM DISPLAY'D

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This article has grown out of an earlier one which appeared in *Studies in English* some four years ago.¹ The earlier article, written in collaboration with Mr. Scouten, recounted what seemed to us an interesting story of the various transformations of a long popular rogue-theme through various stages in English dramatic history from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. We attempted to show how the different versions of the story of a clever rogue's triumph over a rapacious vintner reflected certain significant phases of development in English drama as the plot was used in tragicomedy, Commonwealth droll, farcical afterpiece, ballad-opera, and pantomime. In fact, the only remaining form in which the story might conceivably have been used seemed to us to be the polemical play, a form very common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But we were disappointed in our search for a disputatious Vintner.

In the summer of 1948, while working in the Huntington Library, I chanced upon a very rare little piece called *Methodism Display'd*,² which upon examination proved to be the one item missing from our picture. And further study has revealed that *Methodism Display'd* is more than just a further metamorphosis of the old vintner theme, for

¹Leo Hughes and Arthur H. Scouten, "Some Theatrical Adaptations of a Picaresque Tale," *The University of Texas Studies in English*, 1945-1946, pp. 98-114.

²*Methodism Display'd: a Farce of One Act. As it was intended to be Perform'd at the Moot-Hall in Newcastle, Nov. 4, 1743. Alter'd and Publish'd by Mr. Este, From a Farce, call'd, Trick upon Trick; or, the Vintner in the Suds—Ill befall Such meddling Priests, who kindle up Confusion, And vex the quiet world with their vain Scruples. Rowe's Jane Shore. Newcastle upon Tyne: Printed for the Publisher, and may be had of him at his Lodgings in the Flesh-Market, and the Booksellers of Durham, Sunderland, and Morpeth. [Price sixpence.]*—I have used this publication with the kind permission of the authorities of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

in its unhappy career the little play reveals a dramatic episode in the history of the eighteenth-century provincial theatre and of the continuous war between theatrical people and their enemies in the church, in this case the newly established group of Wesleyans.

To begin with the story of attempted production, I shall try to outline—as accurately as the meager records permit—the history of the performance of *Methodism Display'd*. The company, under the leadership of Thomas Este, author of our play, called itself the Edinburgh Company of Comedians, as we learn from an entry in John Wesley's *Journal* which I shall quote at length a little farther on. From the accounts of James Dibdin³ and others we can trace some of the activities of this troupe, though the trail is often quite faint. Their career in Edinburgh can scarcely have begun much before 1741, since the Scottish capital had been especially inhospitable to theatrical troupes for several years just preceding, and since some of the principals in the troupe seem to have been active in various London companies just before the Licensing Act of 1737.⁴

But beginning in 1741 there are scattered records of performances during parts of the next few years, with,

³*The Annals of the Edinburgh Stage*, Edinburgh, 1888.

⁴The cast lists Este, Lyon, Hamilton, Giles, Boyer, and Mrs. Este. There was an Este in another vintner play, *The Imposter, or the Biter Bit*, at Bartholomew Fair in August, 1734, according to the *Daily Advertiser*. Genest lists an Este—unfortunately none of these actors have their Christian names given in the records I am quoting—in the Drury Lane company in 1735–36, 1736–37; a Mr. Lyon in Giffard's company, at both Goodman's Fields and Lincoln's Inn Fields, during these seasons and in 1737–38 at Covent Garden; and various Hamiltons in Giffard's company and at Drury Lane about this time. Sybil Rosenfeld lists the names of Lyon and several Hamiltons for various provincial companies in England in the late 1730's; she also adds the name of Giles as being a member of the company at Norwich in 1736. (*Strolling Players & Drama in the Provinces, 1660–1765* [Cambridge, 1939], pp. 58, 67, 98, 227–28, 232.) It seems highly probable that the consolidation of London companies brought about by the Licensing Act of 1737 caused many of the minor players to scatter throughout the provinces, where there was any possibility of remaining in the profession.

however, a generous gap from February, 1743, to February, 1744. It is within this gap that our story falls.

Whether he found receipts too meager or opposition too strong it would be impossible to say, but in the fall of 1743 Este seems to have decided to try pastures farther south and moved his troupe to Newcastle upon the Tyne. Whatever motivated his choice of Newcastle, it could hardly have been an unhappier one. Two years earlier, if we may accept John Wesley's estimate of Newcastle's moral state, there might have been a different story. In a letter written in July, 1743, to the mayor of the city Wesley tells of his own decision to visit Newcastle, of what he found there, and of what changes his visits wrought:

When I was first pressed by the Countess of Huntingdon to go and preach to the colliers in or near Newcastle, that objection immediately occurred, "Have they no churches and ministers already?" It was answered, "They have churches, but they never go to them! and ministers but they seldom or never hear them! Perhaps they may hear you. And what if you save (under God) but one soul?" I yielded. I took up my cross and came. I preached Jesus, the Saviour of sinners. Many sinners of all sorts came and heard. Many were (and are) saved from their sins. The drunkards are sober, the common swearers fear God, the Sabbath-breakers now keep the day holy.⁵

This account, however, is in retrospect. From the *Journal* we get an even closer view of the striking change. Wesley first arrived in Newcastle the evening of Friday, May 28, 1742. His notes read:

We came to Newcastle about six, and after a short refreshment walked into town. I was surprised; so much drunkenness, cursing and swearing (even from the mouths of little children) do I never remember to have seen and heard before, in so small a compass of time. Surely this place is ripe for Him, who "came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."⁶

And further entries in the *Journal* show the truly astounding effect of Wesley's preaching, which he began on the

⁵*The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A. M.*, ed. John Telford (London, 1831), II, 14-15.

⁶*The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A. M.*, ed. F. W. Macdonald (London, 1906), I, 374.

following Sunday, in a principal street of the “poorest and most contemptible part of the town.”

John Wesley’s first visit to Newcastle was brief—he seems always to have been on the move—but the work he began there was continued by others, somewhat later by his brother Charles, so that when he next returned, on November 13, 1742, he found the Society already active and a very different state of affairs from what had originally distressed him so profoundly. Subsequent visits found the work of conversion going forward so well that his letter of July, 1743, to the mayor may very well have given a true picture of affairs.

It was into this city stirring with newly awakened zeal, then, that Thomas Este led his troupe of hard-pressed actors. What happened on the days preceding the ill-fated performance of Friday, November 4, may be conjectured from the dedication and the preface to *Methodism Display’d*. There may have been earlier performances, but it seems highly unlikely. Most probably Este let it be known that the company hoped to perform some of the standard plays and afterpieces which the Edinburgh records indicate were in their repertory. But Wesley’s new converts were not disposed to let the actors carry on peacefully. According to Este’s dedication, a certain “Ir-reverend Un-ordain’d Methodist Preacher, W--ll---ms,⁷ of the Society House without P--g--m G---t,” to whom the dedication is mockingly addressed, incited a “Mob, or hot-headed Dupes, [who] violently assaulted me, and would have sous’d and sopp’d me in the well.”

Moreover, Este’s preface continues the account, his Methodist opponents “spread a Rumour, that the Players wou’d not be permitted to act [the play], without much Mischief.” And another leader of the opposition, a “crooked Disciple of this W--ll--ms etc. a Journeyman Printer to Mr.

⁷I can throw no real light on the identity of Williams; I suppose he is the Williams referred to in Wesley’s entry in the *Journal* for December 7, 1742, but that entry tells us nothing beyond the fact that Wesley, being ill, sent him to negotiate for ground the Society wished to build their house on.

Thompson and Company," threatened Este with "a Capt. Porteous's Fate," an obvious reference to the lynching in 1736 of the captain of the Edinburgh guard, an event which provides Scott with his grim backdrop to the story of Effie and Jeanie Deans.

All of these threats and acts of violence failed to turn Este from his purpose. He not only went forward with arrangements for the performance; he even took pains to invite further trouble by revamping an old play for the occasion. For *Methodism Display'd*, billed as the afterpiece to *The Conscious Lovers* for November 4, is, as I shall show later, simply another version of the old vintner story.

Eventually, however, the righteous were to triumph. On the night of the performance providence intervened—according to the testimony of both parties. Of course the manner of intervention was differently interpreted on either side.

Este's account, given in his preface, reads:

Trick upon Trick; or, Methodism Display'd . . . was intended to have been perform'd at the Moot-Hall; but the Building gave way, from the Number of Persons crowding the Seats, which had like to have prov'd a dismal Catastrophe; but Providence guided all, and no Damage sustained but the demolishing a few Lanthorns. This has given Rise to a Report, that as it was a Mock on G—d's chosen People, no less than a Judgment cou'd be expected; and, I hear, a Thanksgiving was made by way of Triumph over the Wicked.⁸

For the opposition's version we have the account of the leader himself. John Wesley had reappeared in Newcastle on the preceding Monday. The entry in his *Journal* for Wednesday, November 2, reads:

The following advertisement was published:—"For the benefit of Mr. Este. By the Edinburgh Company of Comedians, on Friday, Nov. 4, will be acted a comedy, called, *The Conscious Lovers*: to which will be added, a Farce, called *Trick upon Trick; or, Methodism Displayed*."

⁸Miss Rosenfeld tells us of "*A Prelude to the Plays, 1729*, by a follower of Collier's, which cites the falling down of the Ipswich playhouse, 'to the Hurt of many, and the fright of many more,' as a divine rebuke." (*Strolling Players*, p. 97.)

Between the entries for Wednesday and Sunday there appears an undated one which, though long and strangely circumstantial, I give in full:

On Friday a vast multitude of spectators were assembled in the Moot-Hall to see this. It was believed, there could not be less than fifteen hundred people, some hundreds of whom sat on rows of seats, built upon the stage. Soon after the Comedians had begun the first act of the play, on a sudden all those seats fell down at once, the supporters of them breaking like a rotten stick; the people were thrown one upon another, about five foot forward, but not one of them hurt: after a short time, the rest of the spectators were quiet and the actors went on. In the middle of the second act, all the shilling seats gave a crack, and sunk several inches down; a great noise and shrieking followed, and as many as could readily get at the door, went out and returned no more: notwithstanding this, when the noise was over, the actors went on with the play. In the beginning of the third act, the entire stage suddenly sunk about six inches; the players retired with great precipitation; yet in a while they began again. At the latter end of the third act, all the sixpenny seats, without any kind of notice, fell to the ground; there was now a cry on every side; it being supposed that many were crushed to pieces: but upon inquiry, not a single person (such was the mercy of God!) was either killed or dangerously hurt; two or three hundred remaining still in the hall. Mr. Este (who was to act the Methodist) came upon the stage, and told them, "For all this, he was resolved the farce should be acted." While he was speaking, the stage sunk six inches more, on which he ran back in the utmost confusion, and the people as fast as they could out of the door, none staying to look behind him.

Which is most surprising, That those players acted this farce the next week or, That some hundreds of people came again to see it?

The last paragraph suggests that perhaps the actors did triumph in the end, but I can find no more records of their activities in Newcastle. The titlepage of *Methodism Display'd* is sufficient evidence that Este must have stayed long enough to have his revised play printed. That the company remained any great length of time seems hardly likely. At any rate, they were once more established at their theatre in Edinburgh by February 1, 1744, as Dibdin's records show.

Turning now to an examination of the play, I shall first of all try to fix it in its proper context in the vintner series

described in our earlier article and then take up some of the details included specifically for the controversial occasion.

According to the title page, Este took his play "from a Farce, call'd, *Trick upon Trick; or, The Vintner in the Suds.*" In the preface he gives even more particulars, explaining that he is reproducing only the second act, omitting the rest "because it has lately been publish'd for Mr. Yarrow, Comedian, by Subscription, and many of them are in this Town." This account seems clear and simple enough, but a close comparison of the play with what I assume to be the Yarrow version indicates that Este's single act is not merely a rehash of Yarrow's.

For one thing, there is some difficulty about titles. The Yarrow version I have used is entitled *Trick upon Trick: or, The Vintner Outwitted*, which is also the form given in Mr. Nicoll's handlist under Yarrow.⁹ However, Miss Rosenfeld gives the title of Yarrow's piece—with a cast identical with that given in the version I have used—with the *Vintner in the Suds* subtitle;¹⁰ a piece of the same title was performed in Southwark in 1749;¹¹ and later printed versions I have examined, such as the one published in Edinburgh by A. Donaldson in 1760, also have the "Suds" subtitle. It is difficult therefore to be certain, from the evidence of titles alone, whether or not Este did use Yarrow's version as the basis of his play.

An examination of the cast, however, makes it fairly clear that Este went back to the older three-act version of Bullock, *Woman's Revenge*,¹² for he includes among the *dramatis personae* a certain Padwell, who has no place in Yarrow's version but first appears in Bullock's play as the renamed Shamock of Mrs. Behn's *Revenge*. And two or three details in the dialogue suggest even more clearly a use of Bullock's play, or, somewhat less likely, some adaptation

⁹*A History of Early Eighteenth Century Drama, 1700–1750* (Cambridge, 1929), p. 364.

¹⁰*Strolling Players*, p. 131.

¹¹*The Daily Advertiser*, January 23, 1749.

¹²Christopher Bullock, *A Woman's Revenge; or, a Match in Newgate*, London, 1715.

of it other than Yarrow’s. For example, at the point where Vizard picks Mrs. Mixum’s pocket to recover his own papers, Bullock has,

Bevil. By the Light ’tis Vizard! Who could have suspected a Rogue in this Habit?

Free. Who could have suspected anything else in this Habit? ’Tis the tolerated Garb of Family-Pickpockets.

Yarrow omits this exchange altogether, but Este, who like Yarrow has no equivalent for Bullock’s Bevil, has Freeman say with no prompting:

Free. Nay, of late, this is the common Cloak for Family Pick-pockets; but they now grow so audacious, that they demand our Reason of us; and if we deny them, they tell us we are damn’d.

Then toward the end of the play he uses this passage from Bullock over again:

Mix. . . . But who wou’d have suspected thy Rogue’s Face under that sanctify’d Garb.

Free. Because none but Rogues dare to counterfeit Sanctity.

The items just given suggest something of the feelings of the adaptor toward his Methodist opponents. A further study of details shows how violent Este had really become. Having altered the part of his prison-visiting sharper in disguise as a minister from “what it was in the Original, viz. a Presbyterian Parson,” to a “Methodist Un-ordain’d Preacher,” he stopped at nothing in his attempts to vilify his enemy. Vizard-Williams is unjust, dishonest, hypocritical, mercenary, lecherous.¹³ He cants endlessly of the “Society,” of the “New Light,” of the “Temple of Zeal,” and so on. Padwell reveals that his own wife has succumbed to the blandishments of the New Light group and given them two of the family’s three blankets, with the result that two of their children have died of exposure. And Vizard finally de-

¹³Este had already catalogued Williams’ virtues in the dedication: “I take Pride, Impudence, Hypocrisy, and Enthusiasm, to be the principal Ingredients, towards the Composition, of an Unordained Methodist Preacher. I might add to these, Envy, Hatred, Malice, and all Uncharitableness.”

livers a peroration against the whole new sect, or the leaders especially:

They were a Nuisance at our Universities; and endeavoring to make Schisms in the establish'd Church, the government very wisely manag'd to send them abroad; so having made the most they cou'd of their new Doctrine in America, return, and wou'd insolently persuade us into a Belief that they are become Saints.

So intent on castigating his opponents does Este become that he quite forgets for a time that Vizard is just a sharper posing as a minister to harass the vintner further and has him appear to be an actual zealous hypocrite. The following passage, for example, reveals the adaptor's carelessness:

Viz. O horrible! thy Obstinacy and Slander will weigh heavily upon thee, and sink thee suddenly to the bottomless Pit.

Pad. Bottomless Pit! bottomless Well, you mean, where your Crew were going to drown one of the Players: I'll e'en to my cell, and send for a Divine of our own Establish'd Church, and not a Sect that's established no where. [*Exit.*]

Viz. This Fellow's Truths have almost put me to a Stand; but I must not seem confounded. [*aside.*]

When, a few minutes later, Vizard's true identity has been disclosed he joins the others in railing at Methodists, as may be seen in the speech quoted just above.

After some allusions to events of topical interest, such as the marriage of Whitefield¹⁴ and the hanging of "Sir" William Brown,¹⁵ the piece ends with two ballad airs, not in

¹⁴Whitefield had given his enemies a fertile theme for ridicule when, two years earlier, he had married a Welsh widow ten years his senior and reputedly wealthy, though Tyerman offers some evidence that she was not wealthy. (*The Life of the Rev. George Whitefield* [London, 1877], I, 531.)

¹⁵There are two allusions to this "Sir" William Brown in the play. From the context it seems reasonably certain that Este is trying to make capital of a recent event of some notoriety in the region: "Monday, August 8th this year [1743], one William Brown, a bold and desperate man, who was at the head of a great number of thieves or moss troopers, and had been convicted at the assizes at Newcastle upon Tyne, was hanged without the west gate of that town, for returning from transportation. His execution had been hastened for fear of a rescue." (*The History and Antiquities of . . . Newcastle upon Tyne* [Newcastle, 1789], II, 523-24.)

Este's sources. One, to the tune of Henry Carey's famous "Sally," begins, "Of all the trades from North to South, the New Light's past contending"; the other, to the equally famous "Which Nobody Can Deny," goes, "A Methodist Preacher's an absolute Cheat."

Surveying the entire act, we find that Este has kept the skeleton of the original vintner play and a fraction of the original lines; his additions, on the other hand, have swelled the act to at least twice the length of Yarrow's, or of the comparable sections in Bullock's play.

That *Methodism Display'd* was ever performed, or attempted, again I seriously doubt. At least I have no evidence of another performance. W. H. Logan records performances of one or two versions of the vintner story in Edinburgh in the 1750's,¹⁶ but these were pretty certainly not Este's. And by this time Este himself was dead, as we learn from Dibdin's reproduction of an item in the *Caledonian Mercury* for February 12, 1745:

... about 6 in the evening, died Mr. Thomas Este, one of the managers of the Concert in the Taylor's Hall, who has for these 4 years past most agreeably entertained the town with his excellent performances on the stage. As he was a most indulgent and affectionate husband, a tender father, a sincere friend, and a facetious and agreeable companion, his death is greatly lamented by all who had the pleasure of his acquaintance.¹⁷

Nor do I find any indications that Este's triumphant enemies in Newcastle gloated over their success. At least I find nothing of the sort in Wesley's notes or letters. It would be quite uncharacteristic of John Wesley to triumph over a fallen enemy or even to show any unreasonable antipathy to the theatre or theatrical people as the few references to theatrical matters in his journal and his letters show. Twenty years later, for example, he wrote to his brother in Bristol, stating what would seem to be his own relatively moderate position. Evidently Charles and some of the other Methodist leaders had urged him to share in a

¹⁶*Fragmenta Scoto-Dramatica, 1715-1758* (Edinburgh, 1835), pp. 22-28.

¹⁷*Annals*, pp. 55-56.

formal petition against a proposed theatre at Bristol. John wrote, December 7, 1764, from London, opposing formal action and proposing instead the mere writing of a letter, to be signed by "all Bristol Methodists." Two weeks later he again wrote to Charles, this time enclosing a copy of the proposed letter to the Bristol council.

This letter is quite moderate by comparison with most of the anti-theatrical pamphlets of the day. Denying any intention to "press anything upon you," he points out calmly and briefly his—ostensibly *their*—arguments against the theatre: 1. its unfortunate moral influence; 2. the harm it may do to trade and to "the spirit of industry and close application to business," especially among young people.¹⁸

The *Journal* furnishes even more striking evidence that John Wesley was no self-blinded zealot on the subject. The entry for June 9, 1757, reads,

Today, Douglas, the play which has made so much noise, was put into my hands. I was astonished to find, it is one of the finest tragedies I ever read. What a pity that a few lines were not left out! And that it was ever acted at Edinburgh!¹⁹

The experience of Este, however, reveals clearly enough that the leader's moderation was not always shared by his followers. The whole episode points rather to the fact that the resurgence of zeal represented by the Wesleyan movement added some vigorous support in the war against the theatres begun more or less officially by Jeremy Collier.

¹⁸*Letters*, IV, 276–77, 279–80.

¹⁹*Journal*, II, 379. John Wesley was drawn into a controversy over the theatre on at least one other occasion when, in December, 1760, he wrote a letter to a London newspaper at the time Foote's *Minor*, attacking the Methodists in general and Whitefield in particular, was causing such an uproar. However, this exchange can hardly be described as dealing with the subject of the theatre at all since Wesley was not concerned with attacking the theatre, or even Foote, but with defending his own beliefs and fellow believers. For the whole controversy see Tyerman's biography of Whitefield.