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Mary Robinson’s two-act farce Nobody (Drury Lane, 1794) features a humorous scene in which Nelly Primrose, a bumbling servant woman, reads the newspaper to her aristocratic employer, Lady Languid:

Theatre Royal Drury Lane—Just imported a large Quantity of Excellent Spirits—A certain Lady of the Beau Monde—Stray’d from a Field near Hackney—with Twelve waggon Loads of Flannel Shirts—for our gallant Troops on the Continent (I hope they’ll arrive safe with all my Soul) At Mrs. Cassino’s last Ball—no one was more Admir’d for Beauty—than the Arabian Savage & the Kangaroos—The best Concert this year was perform’d by the Brunswick & the Vengeur (I suppose that was a French Tune) The Piece concluded with Rule Britania—Gone Off, a large quantity of Indian Crackers—“whoever will bring them back?”

Nelly’s reading across the width of the newspaper page rather than vertically down a column would no doubt have provoked audience laughter, but her misreading is less nonsensical than it may seem. In fact, it reveals striking associations between the playhouse (Drury Lane), fashionable life and scandal (the “Excellent Spirits,” the “Beau Monde,” “Mrs. Cassino’s last Ball,” “a certain Lady . . . stray’d”), nationalism and war (the “Troops,” patriotic hymns, the 1794 naval battle between the English Brunswick and the French Vengeur), and colonialist spectacle (“the Arabian Savage,” “Kangaroos,” and Indian fireworks). Through the newspaper’s dazzling juxtaposition of reports, Robinson exposes the modern, complex cultural matrix of dramatic, social, and imperial performance.

It is this very phenomenon that Daniel O’Quinn addresses in his insightful new study Entertaining Crisis in the Atlantic Imperium 1770–1790 (Johns Hopkins, 2011). In this book, he contends that the mediation of political and theatrical events, both on the dramatic stage and newspaper page, became a way...
for British imperial culture to negotiate the anxiety and loss that resulted from losing the war with America. Carefully situating his argument within a historical trajectory, he reveals how the close of the Seven Years’ War, the rise of the dominant four-page newspaper such as the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Morning Post*, and the public demand for entertainment resulted in the increased interplay between martial events, theatrical productions, and journalistic reportage. It was in this highly mediated environment, O’Quinn argues, that the theater and the press worked in tandem, not only to inform their audiences about the transatlantic military crisis but also to reflect upon the intimate link between political and public life. At a time when British colonial identity was fracturing, the theater and the press became integral in conceptualizing and articulating anew what it meant to be a Briton.

As O’Quinn shows, the recalibration of British subjectivity in the years during and after the loss of the American colonies was dependent, in particular, upon a reconfiguration of aristocratic sociability—one that exorcized effete and dissipated masculinity in favor of a potent and virtuous male governance unmarred by bellicosity. In many ways, it entailed—à la David Garrick’s *Miss in Her Teens* (Covent Garden, 1747)—a rejection of Fribble and Flash for the heroic Captain Loveit. But, as O’Quinn demonstrates throughout his monograph, such a maneuver was neither as straightforward nor as simple as Garrick’s afterpiece might suggest. Indeed, it involved complex cultural negotiations in a number of social arenas both at home and abroad. O’Quinn documents this transition through an interdisciplinary and multilayered examination of London stage plays (by dramatists such as Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Hannah More, Arthur Murphy, Charles Dibdin, John Home, Hannah Cowley, and George Colman the Younger), performance events (from theatricals, to outdoor festivals, to musical concerts), media commentary (newspaper reports and political cartoons), music (by George Friedrich Handel), and poetry (by William Cowper).

O’Quinn opens his study with an examination of the 1774 Fête Champêtre at the Oaks in Surrey—a lavish, private masque hosted by General John Burgoyne. At the time of the Fête, Burgoyne was working on the passage of the Coercive Acts as a means to quell insurgence in the wake of the Boston Tea Party and other acts of resistance. It is against this political backdrop that O’Quinn reads the Fête and its metamorphosis from an eroticized garden party to a chaste indoor entertainment as representative of a transition in aristocratic and national identity, necessitated by changes in the empire. Given the daily papers’ extensive coverage of the event, the public was able to witness—along with the Fête’s guests—its funneling of upper-class sociability from a scene of risqué pleasantry into one of conjugal fidelity punctuated heavily by martial symbolism. This redefinition of the aristocracy’s relationship to the nation—from that of leisure-lovers to chaste patriots—was recapitulated and commented upon not only in the print media but also in Garrick’s *The Maid of the Oaks* (Drury
Lane, 1774) and in Antonio Zucchi’s paintings, both of which offered additional opportunities for various forms of the Fête’s regulatory fantasy of patrician rule to filter into culture at large.

Such a fantasy was, however, a fragile one. 1775 witnessed the beginning of the American Revolutionary War and the coincident failure of the Thames Regatta, another aristocratic pageant that, like the Fête Champêtre, received extensive news coverage. The product of the collective efforts of parliamentarians Temple Simon Luttrell and Sir Thomas Lyttelton (along with the aristocratic event organizer Teresa Cornelys), the Regatta began at Westminster Bridge as a rowing race and procession of boats carrying notable politicians and aristocrats along the river and concluded at Ranelagh with eating, drinking, dancing, and gambling. O’Quinn reveals that the event’s juxtaposition of politics and pleasure met with disdain in the press, where it was represented as an emblem of aristocratic dissolution, social disorder, and the commercial and political mismanagement of the nation. Its mediation in the newspapers and in Dibdin’s ballad opera The Waterman (Haymarket, 1775) marks an important turning point, he contends, with regard to public engagement with problems of elite governance. The sense of national insecurity that the Regatta raised further fueled the papers’ discussions of Frederick, Lord North and, as O’Quinn goes on to show, is echoed in some of the most popular plays of the era: Sheridan’s The Duenna (Covent Garden, 1775) and The School for Scandal (Drury Lane, 1777), and More’s Percy (Covent Garden, 1777).

In his first two chapters, O’Quinn addresses the way in which the theater and the press were united in their attempt to shore up and to critique patrician rule, and, through the work of Sheridan and More, to lay the foundation for “regime change”—the topic of chapters 3 and 4. By 1778, Burgoyne had surrendered at Saratoga, and William Howe, a commander of the British forces in America, was under attack not only because he proved unable to suppress rebellion but also because he promoted dramatic entertainment for the troops, which many perceived as frivolous indulgence. During the shift in command from Howe to Sir Henry Clinton, Captain John André staged the Mischianza in Philadelphia on 18 May 1778, an event bookended with a parodic rescripting of the Fête Champêtre and the Thames Regatta. The spectacle, performed with the intention of being covered in London papers, began with a regatta on the Delaware River, included a mock Medieval tournament, and culminated with indoor feasting and dancing. By subsuming gambling and commercial enterprise in favor of military and national display and by enacting a feminization of martial practice, the event navigated a middle path between the effete Regatta and bellicose Fête as a means to criticize the Ministry’s engagement with the war and to redefine martial masculinity for a new age. O’Quinn discusses how, nonetheless, the event received a less-than-favorable response in the press for its narcissism and celebration of Howe’s dubious achievements, and he closes with an allegorical reading of Home’s tragedy Douglas—performed by officers
on the day following—as representative, in part, of “loyal America grieving for a lost relationship with Britain” (182).

O’Quinn zeroes in on this sense of grief and mourning in chapter 4, where he identifies a link in the cultural imagination between Garrick’s death in 1779 and the acquittal of Admiral Augustus Keppel. While Garrick—actor, playwright, and manager of Drury Lane Theater—might seem worlds away from Keppel, who faced court-martial in the wake of the indecisive 1778 Battle of Ushant, O’Quinn reveals how discourses surrounding these national heroes were similarly preoccupied with the act of reading and re-manifesting their material bodies as a means to gauge the immense socio-political shifts facing the nation. Taken together, the press’s layered accounts of Garrick’s funeral procession, which moved his body from his London home to his burial site at Westminster Abbey, along with corporeally oriented images of Keppel underscore the notion that it was truly the end of an era on both the theatrical and world stages. Strained poetic and monumental efforts to memorialize Garrick further signified a nation at a crossroads, O’Quinn argues, and Sheridan’s The Critic (Drury Lane, 1779) illustrates how constructing monuments to the past may fail to ensure cultural continuity. In essence, the nation faced a constitutive gap and was placed in the position of creating fresh theatrical means by which to buttress its identity.

Such possibility came with the new decade and its reimagining of the national hero. The mass celebrations and riots that accompanied Keppel’s acquittal functioned as demonstrations against the Ministry and Admiralty; due to this, Admiral George Bridges Rodney’s subsequent defeat of the Spanish fleet in 1780 met with relatively little fanfare. The Morning Post criticized the public’s failure to commemorate Rodney’s victory, diagnosing it as a sign of patriotic lassitude, but, as O’Quinn points out, a remarkable event occurred on 29 February 1780 when news of the Admiral’s triumph interrupted and influenced the staging of two plays: Cowley’s The Belle’s Stratagem (Covent Garden, 1780), a comedy that links aristocratic sociability with nation and empire rather than with dissolute excess, and Murphy’s The Upholsterer, or What News? (Drury Lane, 1758), a farce that, given its juxtaposition with the news about Rodney, suggests the potential for British naval supremacy in the West Indies. Both plays refer directly to the press, and the combination of theater, news, and politics on this evening epitomizes the way in which the future of the empire was being mediated through print and performance. The second half of O’Quinn’s chapter contextualizes Rodney’s 1782 defeat of Admiral De Grasses at Les Saintes on 12 April 1782—an event that maintained Britain’s colonial hold on the West Indies—in terms of Cowley’s Which is the Man? (Covent Garden, 1782) and Colman’s Inkle and Yarico (Haymarket, 1787), showing how both plays reimagine masculinity in terms of martial heroism and how the refiguration of Rodney as a champion of the nation embodies this shift.

O’Quinn’s final chapter focuses on the five-day Handel Commemoration
in 1784 as one of the most significant performance events in the history of the English nation. He carefully traces the tiered staging of Handel’s oratorios at Westminster Abbey and the Pantheon, showing how the arrangement of the musical program, alteration of a libretto, and manipulation of staging environments served to obfuscate past military losses, to absolve ruling elites from disastrous events that followed the Seven Years’ War, and to articulate a virtuous political future. Such a demonstration quelled the emasculating threat of the American Revolution and figured forth a potent martial masculinity, intent on the regulation of elite dissipation and excess. O’Quinn’s analysis concludes with a look at the performance of Handel’s *Judas Maccabeus* in Calcutta in 1792, which enacted what he terms “masochistic nationalism” (341)—a form of historical self-chastening via the replaying of past suffering and defeat that allowed for the constitution of a new British imperial order.

*Entertaining Crisis* successfully showcases the dynamic relationship between empire, the theater, and the press during the late eighteenth century. As such, it is an interdisciplinary study so tightly packed with narrative imbrications that one can only fall short in an attempt to summarize it. While its thick and rich coverage of the era may, at times, slow its readers, its textual viscosity is a reflection of its densely overlapping subject matter, and it is the book’s very style and content, in this regard, that makes it a unique and valuable contribution to the fields of transatlantic studies, political and cultural history, gender studies, and performance and theater studies. Rather than approach the topic of British national reconstitution during and after the war with America from just one of these possible angles, O’Quinn makes an effort to render faithfully—the lens of “entertainment”—the subject’s contemporary, multidimensional complexity. In effect, he has uncovered a political and cultural Gordian Knot, sliced through it, and laid bare its intricately interwoven strands. Explaining how they lace together is the challenging work of his book, and he guides readers through their subtle twists and turns with confidence, openly recognizing the sometimes speculative or tendentious nature of potential linkages—particularly those based on an allegorical reading of a play, private theatrical, or libretto. The monograph’s formal replication of the many entertaining “diversions” to which its content attends may thus be understood as a representation of the multifaceted structure of late eighteenth-century performance and print media.

We live, today, in a hyper-mediated world; newspapers, radio, television, cell phones, and the Internet make it possible to access facts and commentary at near light-speed. But as O’Quinn convincingly shows, the Information Age began long before the twentieth century. British print publications and the theater, intending not only to disseminate information swiftly but also to entertain, worked side by side and off of one another in their coverage, interpretation, and critique of cultural and world events. Together, their performances reveal a nation in transition—one engaged in redefining key constitutive concerns such
as masculinity, sociability, and sovereignty. The great achievement of Entertaining Crisis is to bring to light just how central the public stage was to this late eighteenth-century shift. In 1801, Arthur Murphy noted the recent emergence of England’s “fourth estate”: “King, Lords, and Commons, and . . . play-house.”  

While this fourth estate may not have been officially recognized, O’Quinn’s impressive and skillful documentation of the interplay between theater and the news throws a much-needed spotlight on the role of entertainment in the era, illuminating its powerful socio-political force.

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