

Janská, Kristýna

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**“THE NATION’S WEATHER-GLASS A PLAY-HOUSE IS”:  
THEATRE IN THE PROLOGUES AND EPILOGUES  
OF THE EXCLUSION CRISIS**

*Kristýna Janská*

**Abstract**

Based on a corpus of prologues and epilogues staged between 1678 and 1683, the study offers an overview of major tropes reflecting the troublesome situation of theatres due to the political turmoil of the Exclusion Crisis. Based on Habermas’s theory of the rise of the public sphere, supplemented by the theory of the cultural public sphere from contemporary media studies, it explores the relationship between Restoration theatre, political engagement of the public, political print and popular culture. All of these are represented by the prologues and epilogues as a threat to the “elite” conception of Restoration drama and they constitute serious competition to the stage. The harsh, satirical tone of the framing texts, which escalated in the years of the crisis, betrays a fundamental anxiety of the authors and speakers caused by their economic dependence on the emerging cultural marketplace and the changing dynamics between “elite” art, popular culture and entertainment.

**Keywords**

Prologues, epilogues, Restoration drama, Exclusion Crisis, public sphere, popular culture

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*Though Plays and Prologues ne'er did more abound,  
Ne'er were good Prologues harder to be found.*

ATTESTING to the profusion and popularity of prologues and epilogues in the later Restoration period, these are the opening lines to the poignant prologue to Thomas Otway’s *The Atheist*, which in itself is a masterpiece of the genre. It should suffice to justify its longer citation at the very beginning of this article, but apart from the pleasure when read, it also illustrates most of the topics discussed here – the gradual shift towards the harsh, “scolding” tone of prologues and epilogues

by the end of the 1670s, the difficult situation of theatres in competition with various strains of “popular” culture and the arising public sphere in the sense of wide-spread engagement with politics and popular print:<sup>1</sup>

To me the Cause seems eas’ly understood:  
For there are *Poets* prove not *very good*,  
Who, like base Sign-Post Dawbers, wanting Skill,  
Steal from Great Masters Hands, and Copy ill.  
Thus, if by chance, before a Noble Feast  
Of Gen’rous Wit, to whet and fit your Taste,  
Some poignant *Satyr* in a *Prologue* rise,  
And growing *Vices* handsomly chastise;  
Each *Poetaster* thence presumes on *Rules*,  
And ever after calls ye downright Fools.  
.....  
He always in One Line upbraids the *Age*;  
And a good Reason why; it Rymes to *Stage*.  
With *Wit* and *Pit* he keeps a hideous pother;  
Sure to be damn’d by One, for want of T’other:  
But if, by chance, he get the *French Word Raillery*,  
Lord, how he fegues the Vizor-Masques with Gallery!  
.....  
From our *Two Houses* joyning, most will hold,  
Vast Deluges of *Dulness* were foretold.  
Poor *Holborn Ballads* now being born away  
By Tides of *duller Madrigals* than they;  
Jockeys and Jennyes *set* to Northern Airs,  
While Lowsie *Thespis* chaunts at Country Fairs  
*Politick Ditties*, full of Sage Debate,  
And Merry Catches, how to *Rule the State*.  
.....  
No: Let th’ angry ’Squire give his *Iambicks* o’re,  
Twirl Crevat-strings, but write *Lampoons* no more[.] (Otway 1684, “Prologue”)

Among others, this poem reflects the popularity of scathing, satirical prologues and epilogues in the late Restoration period, while simultaneously revealing the inherent liminality of the genre. The sharp satirical tone illustrates the prevalent attacking mode of prologues, though this time the primary victim is not the critical audience in the pit, as would be typical for the genre, but rather rival authors.

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion of the relationship between popular print and the rise of the public sphere, see for example McDowell 1998.

Although it has been identified as a direct attack at Thomas Shadwell by J. C. Ross (1973, 753–60), it does, at the same time, satirize the vogue for chastising prologues that were predominant since the onset of the Popish Plot. Indeed, the rhymed couples disclosed by Otway (age–stage, gallery–raillery, etc.) appear frequently and had become a stock tool in the genre by the year 1683, when *The Atheist* was staged.<sup>2</sup> What Otway achieves in his text is to satirically subvert the common pretension of prologue speakers to the right to moralize by shattering their aesthetic authority, while implicitly asserting his own authority as a superior poet through the very tool of satire.

As we will see, (re)assertion of aesthetic authority is one of the key features of the prologues and epilogues of the Exclusion Crisis years 1678–1683, so much so that its constant reiteration bespeaks certain anxiety. Considering the wealth of material, the critical attention paid to the genre of prologues and epilogues in the period still seems to be surprisingly scarce. Apart from the critical edition by Pierre Danchin (1984), which only offers a modest, summarizing introduction, and the gender- and actor-focused monograph by Diana Solomon (2013), there are only a few studies available. Following the suggestions of Danchin and Solomon that the fundamental characteristic of the genre is its specific positioning on the triangle of author – actor – audience, Paul McCallum analysed the formation of a common identity of the Pit through the discourse of prologues and epilogues. He focused on the strategy of “cozening” as a scheme in which the flattering image of a Pit-member had been built and indulged for a decade in order to be undermined and ridiculed afterwards, in the turbulent years of Exclusion Crisis. Though McCallum is careful to mention that the cozening scheme was not premeditated (2007, 35), the narrative he creates is in its essence teleological and aims towards “poets’ assertion of and exercise of expanded cultural authority” (2007, 57).

Nevertheless, returning to Otway’s prologue to *The Atheist* cited above, we need to realize that after the previous success of *Venice Preserv’d*, Thomas Otway gained the seemingly safe position of established playwright, and yet his preoccupation with rival writers of supposedly lower aesthetic capabilities betrays deep insecurity inherent in the very matrix of the theatre of the Restoration period, and perhaps of theatre as such. This article proposes a different reading of the escalated, harsh tone of Exclusion Crisis prologues and epilogues.<sup>3</sup> Using these framing

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<sup>2</sup> Dating of all plays mentioned here is based on Susan J. Owen’s *Restoration Theatre and Crisis* (2003, 311). If not stated in the print, it is assumed that the author of prologues and epilogues is the same as the author of the play.

<sup>3</sup> Based on McCallum’s argument, the corpus of prologues and epilogues chosen for this study was limited by the years of greatest political turmoil following the Popish Plot allegations, 1678–1683,

texts as specific kinds of meta-theatrical commentaries, unlike most aesthetic debates presented in the immediate interaction with the audience, shows how the aesthetic authority of theatre as a place for poetry and art (in their idealized understanding as devoid of economic motives presented in many of the framing texts) stands in an ever-lasting clash with the rules of cultural marketplace, demand for entertainment and popular culture. The reading of prologues and epilogues presented in this article focuses on the reflection of the situation of the licensed theatres during the political crisis and their relation, or rather opposition, to what could be vaguely termed “popular entertainment.” Deriving from the fluid conception of popular culture presented in Barry Reay’s *Popular Cultures in England 1550–1750* and bearing in mind the variety of overlapping publics and their “cultures” during the whole Early Modern period, the article sets out to explore the concept from a different perspective. Rather than applying a pre-defined conception of the “popular” and the “elite” on the theatrical texts, this paper explores what the theatrical commentaries present as “popular” in the Restoration drama itself and what they see as their genuine competition. It transpires that though Restoration theatres remained elite in their nature (considering the high admission price and close relations to the Court), there is inherent anxiety hidden in the prologues and epilogues, which emerges in times of (political as well as economic) crisis, especially after the Popish Plot allegations of 1678. The harsh tone of prologues and epilogues in the plays staged during the turbulent years of the Exclusion Crisis bespeaks fundamental insecurity, instability and confusion about the changing cultural function of the theatre.

### **1. Popular Features of Restoration drama**

In his complete edition of Restoration prologues and epilogues, Pierre Danchin pointed out several distinctive features of these framing texts after 1677. Among others, he mentions the prominence of speakers while “the author seems to disappear,” omnipresent reflections of the political crisis, frequent separate broadside publications and numerous complaints about the “sad situation of the stage” (1984, xiii–xxiv). Even this brief list points to the specific status of prologues and epilogues in terms of their interpretation and inherent liminality of the genre which playfully explores the margin between the fictional world of the stage

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and only included prologues and epilogues attached to plays staged or published in this period (based on the bibliography compiled by Susan J. Owen 2003, 300–11), thus omitting a number of manuscript texts.

and the real world of the audience and responds to both (often in almost Brechtian terms). Prologues and epilogues form bridges between the stage and the audience and to a high degree reflect upon the relation of the theatre to the cultural and social context. As stated in the introduction to a study in “minor” genres of eighteenth-century drama,

one can hardly analyze prologues and epilogues without bearing in mind the historical and cultural contexts of their composition. In these works, the actual texts and their social contexts are inseparable, and the fluid nature of prologues, epilogues, and dedications as they were performed on the stage often mirror the mutable historical context. . . . [P]rologues and epilogues represent a kind of conversation, a dialogue between playwrights and between playwright and audience. (Ennis and Slagle 2007, 20)

The matrix is more complex though. Restoration prologues and epilogues profoundly explore the liminal space *in-between* – the interplay between the author and his play, the audience, the actor in his role in the play, the actor as a speaker of the prologue, the actor as a “public persona” (already a kind of performed identity). Moreover, with the emergence of politically engaged prologues and epilogues of the Exclusion Crisis, they entered another liminal space – suddenly they were frequently published separately as broadside prints, thus invading a newly formed space of popular political print and accentuating the potential of theatre to facilitate public debate.

We have seen in Thomas Otway’s prologue to *The Atheist* that even the vogue for poignant, “scathing” prologues and epilogues was commented upon in the genre itself (similarly in Charles Saunders’s *Tamerlane*: “How modern Prologues differ from the Old! / Those su’d and pray’d, but these huff, rail, and scold”; 1681, “Prologue”). As mentioned above, Paul McCallum has interpreted this discursive strategy as a means of establishing aesthetic authority of the playwrights, especially in the most prominent prologues and epilogues by the most prolific author of the framing texts in these years, John Dryden. Dryden’s texts typically sneer at the audience’s poor taste and often reiterate popular features of Restoration plays as opposed to what would be considered art and poetry:

Their Treat is what your Pallats relish most,  
Charm! Song! and Show! a Murder and a Ghost!  
We know not what you can desire or hope,  
To please you more, but burning of a *Pope*. (Dryden and Lee 1679, “Epilogue”)

Dryden and Lee's epilogue to *Oedipus* employs a food–drama metaphor, recurrent in a majority of the texts, and is mocking the audience for their lack of appreciation/taste for true poetry. As has been studied extensively, Restoration theatre was highly dependent on the visual spectacle and sophisticated stage effects, i.e., the “show,” and this epilogue draws attention to several other features of successful plays: the importance of music and rhymed songs, visual spectacle, great effects like the appearance of a ghost and violence.<sup>4</sup> The last line of the epilogue then bears first mention of the Popish Plot and subsequent events and is the first to present the political turmoil and political engagement of the public as new competition to the stage, factually luring its audience away, among other things by merging of political news and movements with popular culture, as in the Pope-burning processions.

The suggested discussion of the dominance of visual over aural/textual aspects of theatre has common predecessors in Early Modern prologues in what Brian Schneider has called the “war of senses” (2016, 71–91) and is still dominant in the Restoration texts. Frequently seen in Dryden, we can also find the motif of visual aesthetic pleasure presented as less sophisticated in the prologue to John Banks's *The Destruction of Troy*:

Wev'e nothing more to welcome you to Night,  
Than a plain, undrest Play, a homely Sight,  
No Shew to take your Eyes, that are more kind,  
And easier pleas'd than is the dainty mind.  
Language with you's esteem'd upon the Stage,  
Like some affected Gallants of this Age;  
Not for their Sence, but for their Equipage. (Banks 1679, “Prologue”)

It is this kind of text that leads McCallum to his assertion of authority gained by the authors of late Restoration prologues in which he finds “identification of the poet with Providential power, justice, and order” (2007, 60). Dryden in the prime of his career truly does not restrain his scathing tone towards the audience when he describes the Pit as deserving rat poison in the epilogue to *Troilus and Cressida*:

Poets have cause to dread a keeping Pit,  
When Womens Cullyes come to judge of Wit.

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<sup>4</sup> On the importance of violence and murder on Restoration stage, see Jean I. Marsden's chapter “Spectacle, Horror, and Violence” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre* (2000, 174–90). The thrill of a murder on the stage is also reflected in Dryden's prologue to Lee's *Caesar Borgia*.

As we strow Rats-bane when we vermine fear,  
'Twere worth our cost to scatter fool-bane here.

.....  
Next, those, to whom the Stage does not belong  
Such whose Vocation onely is to Song;  
At most to Prologue, when for want of time  
Poets take in for Iournywork in Rhime. (Dryden 1679, "Epilogue")

The epilogue illustrates the typical sneering attitude towards an "undeserving" audience, but also draws our attention to what seems to be a permanent worry among prologue and epilogue writers: the popularity of rhyme, jigs and songs in popular culture as well as on the stage. With the disappearance of rhymed couplets from heroic drama, rhyme regains its usual opposition to blank verse and playwrights utilize it as a means of luring the audience (through its customary use in prologues, epilogues and songs), but also dissociating the texts from "elite" drama. The liminality of prologues and epilogues as a genre emerges here in the inherent conflict in which they systematically satirize the less elite genres of songs and rhymed poems despite being of the same kind in form and often in content as well. The same phenomenon is reflected in the frequent satire of the popularity of prologues and epilogues (already seen in Otway's *Atheist*, but also in the epilogue of Thomas D'Urfey's *The Injured Princess*):

Our next new Play, if this Mode hold in vogue,  
Shall be half Prologue, and half Epilogue.  
The way to please you is easie if we knew't,  
A Iigg, a Song, a Rhyme or two will do't[.] (D'Urfey 1682, "Epilogue")

Another frequent feature of drama, scorned by the dramatist but mentioned in many framing texts, is the popularity of "noise." In terms of a show, we could interpret noise as the aural counterpart of spectacle: this can comprise a lot of theatrical tools, including scenes of strong emotions, fights, violence and rabbles. Noise is certainly considered as unartistic, simplistic feature of a play opposed to sophisticated wit, as in Thomas Shadwell's *The Woman-Captain*:

Good sence, like solid Meat to sickly Men,  
As soon as swallowed, is thrown up agen;  
And for strong Meats, but few of ye are fit  
.....  
Remembring how you used that last he writ,



He made this Low, so to your Level sit;  
Plenty of Noise, and scarcity of Wit[.] (Shadwell 1680b, “Epilogue”)

We see Thomas Shadwell, whose drama supported the Whig partisan aims, using the very same tools as the stark Royalist Dryden: sneering at the audience’s poor taste and employing the food–poetry metaphor. This stock metaphor is mostly used to differentiate between the popular “easily palatable” features of drama, such as farce, noise, rhyme etc., and the more “elite” types of drama, such as sophisticated satire or tragedy, as in Dryden’s prologue to *The Loyal General*:

Weak Stomacks with a long Disease opprest,  
Cannot the Cordials of strong Wit digest:  
Therefore thin Nourishment of Farce ye choose,  
Decoctions of a Barly-water Muse:  
A Meal of Tragedy wou’d make ye Sick,  
Unless it were a very tender Chick. (Dryden 1680b, “Prologue”)<sup>5</sup>

Similarly to the first prologue by Thomas Otway, all the quoted texts share satire that is inherently double-edged. Despite their sneering tone and complaints of the audience’s poor taste, they also reinstate the audience in the position of power, as the plays framed by these texts and the prologues and epilogues themselves comply with public demand.

## **2. Political Engagement as a Rival to the Stage**

Almost all drama of the Exclusion Crisis years was, more or less, politically engaged. That accounts even more for the prologues and epilogues, which never before or after took such open political stance as in these years. However, apart from actively supporting one of the sides in the conflict, there is a strong sense of jeopardy in the texts – political turmoil is represented as a direct threat to the stage (and age). In the reign of Charles II, most of the dramatists and actors were highly dependent on the favour of the Court – but the theatre does not enter politics merely to support the Court (or the Whigs in a few rare cases), it is the political engagement of the audience that deeply affects the stage. Throughout the years 1678–1683, we repeatedly read of the dilapidated state of theatres, low attendance and economic troubles, as in the prologue Aphra Behn’s *The Feign’d Curtizans*:

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<sup>5</sup> Similar use of the food–poetry metaphor is found in the prologue to *Mr. Turbulent*, in which the author compares the audience to a guest who had eaten before coming and then complains about the feast.

The devil take this cursed plotting Age,  
'T has ruin'd all our Plots upon the Stage;  
Suspicions, New Elections, Jealousies,  
Fresh Informations, New discoveries,  
Do so employ the busie fearful Town,  
Our honest calling here is useless grown[.] (Behn 1679, "Prologue")

The Popish Plot allegations and subsequent political turmoil are presented in the prologue as a direct threat to the theatres. Not because they would endanger the stage directly, but rather as competition and rival entertainment for the London public. The concept of political interest and engagement as a kind of entertainment will play a crucial role in our further reading. This complaint is followed by a simile between the alleged frivolity of the stage and keeping a mistress, when the citizens "piously pretend, these are not days, / For keeping Mistresses and seeing Plays." Dryden, in the prologue to Nathaniel Lee's *Caesar Borgia*, similarly refers to the hunger for what Behn termed "fresh informations":

You love to hear of some prodigious Tale,  
The Bell that toll'd alone, or *Irish Whale*.  
News is your Food, and you enough provide,  
Both for your selves and all the World beside.  
One Theatre there is of vast resort,  
Which whilome of Requests was call'd the Court.  
But now the great *Exchange* of News 'tis hight,  
And full of hum and buzz from Noon till Night[.] (Dryden 1680a, "Prologue")

The court of Charles II (and monarchy in the Early Modern period and Restoration in general) was often analysed by scholars for its highly performative character.<sup>6</sup> However, in these turbulent years, the performative aspect is not limited to the functional use of strengthening the monarchy explored by Reay and others, but unintentionally becomes a full-fledged drama with a newly arising audience among the citizens, to whom cheap print offers unprecedented access to the Parliament and Court proceedings and events. This drama is mediated by newspapers and pamphlets much like traditional drama is mediated by the theatre and actors. Playwrights are acutely aware of this new development, as is visible in Dryden's prologue to Nathaniel Lee's *The Loyal General*, in which the newspapers and political print are paralleled with the popular entertainment of the fairs:

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<sup>6</sup> For the analysis specific to the court of Charles II, see for example Jeremy W. Webster's *Performing Libertinism in Charles II's Court: Politics, Drama, Sexuality* (2005). For the performance of royalty as a kind of popular entertainment and culture, see Reay 2014, 143–51.

*Theatre in the Prologues and Epilogues of the Exclusion Crisis*

The Rest may satisfie their curious Itch  
With City Gazets or some Factious Speech,  
Or what-ere Libel for the Publick Good,  
Stirs up the Shrove-tide Crew to Fire and Blood!  
Remove your Benches you apostate Pit,  
And take Above, twelve penny-worth of Wit;  
Go back to your dear Dancing on the Rope,  
Or see what's worse the Devil and the Pope! (Dryden 1680b, "Prologue")

Comparing political print and engagement together with religious debates (or rather anti-Catholic events and gatherings) to the popular performances of acrobats in fairs draws our attention to the crucial transformative process of the Restoration, i.e., the rise of the public sphere. Although Jürgen Habermas identified the Glorious Revolution as the turning point in the rise of the public sphere, as Paula McDowell stressed in her revision of Habermas's theory, it was already the explosion of the press in 1640s and outstanding growth in literacy during the century that enhanced the emergence of the public sphere in print (1998, 4). The prologues and epilogues under our scrutiny certainly attest to the popularity of the political press and debates in the years of the Exclusion Crisis: "Those who once lov'd the Stage, are now in years, / And leave good *Poets* for dull *Pamphleteers*; / Nay, for the worst of *Rascals*, *Libellers*" (Shadwell 1680a, "Epilogue"). Another epilogue by John Dryden not only refers to the print as competition to theatres, but shows that it is more successful in engaging their audience:

'Tis not our want of Wit that keeps us Poor,  
For then the Printers Press would suffer more:  
Their Pamphleteers their Venom dayly spit,  
They thrive by Treason and we starve by Wit. (Dryden 1682, "Epilogue")

However, the satirical commentaries of these poems concerning political print obviously do not present the serious political debates and engagement somewhat idealized in the original Habermas's theory of the rise of the public sphere. Their sneering tone and drawing a constant parallel between the print and popular entertainment rather invites the reader to employ the modern television term of "infotainment," including its derisive connotations.<sup>7</sup> The association of politics, media

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<sup>7</sup> Though infotainment is a term coined in the twentieth century in relation to television, it is very useful to apply to the culture of news from the very beginnings of journalism. It constantly reminds the media scholar of the utmost importance of public demand and audience when considering even the beginnings of print and publishing culture. For more details, see Thussu 2015.

and entertainment, so common in modern social criticism and media studies, is far from automatic in the studies of the Early Modern period, though even Habermas acknowledges the revolting power of popular culture in Bakhtin's understanding presented in *Rabelais and His World* in the prologue to a second edition of his *Structural Transformation*.

The understanding of popular politics of the period as a kind of specific “infotainment” seems surprisingly viable in view of the prologues and epilogues and their presentation of political print and debates, and opens space for further research. It might prove useful to also employ the concept of “cultural public sphere,” as suggested by contemporary media studies, to the popular politics of the Restoration period. According to Jim McGuigan, “Habermas distinguished between the literary public sphere and the political public sphere. Although not separate from one another, their functions diverged in a significant manner.” The literary public sphere allowed for a “complex reflection on chronic and persistent problems of life, meaning and representation” (2005, 429). This binary conception, based on the rather idealized, elite function of journalism in democracy and on elite art, does not offer space for various layers of cultural response to the political life and for entertainment. Therefore, adding the “cultural public sphere” to make a triad allows for a wider consideration of various kinds of media, entertainment, art and literature including their commercial aspects. McGuigan maintains that

the concept of a cultural public sphere refers to the articulation of politics, public and personal, as a contested terrain through affective – aesthetic and emotional – modes of communication. The cultural public sphere trades in pleasures and pains that are experienced vicariously through willing suspensions of disbelief; for instance, by watching soap operas, identifying with the characters and their problems, talking and arguing with friends and relatives about what they should and shouldn't do. (McGuigan 2005, 430)

Turning further to history, McGuigan also shows how the concept can be applied to the nineteenth-century melodrama, in which the sentimental, rather than the cognitive, is a means of education through its affective power. “The cultural public sphere provides vehicles for thought and feeling, for imagination and disputatious argument, that are not necessarily of inherent merit but may be of some consequence” (2005, 435).

Similarly to Victorian melodrama thus conceived, Susan J. Owen has shown how pathos, horror and violence were commonly employed by Restoration playwrights to convey serious political arguments through their affective power and also how the Pope-burning processions and pamphlets, which prologue and epilogue

authors label as lampoon and libel, were highly effective in stirring the public debate. It follows naturally that Odai Johnson describes the Pope-burning pageants as “Whig theatre . . . that sought by performative strategies to politicize the crowd as a stable subject of the Whig Party” (2000, 14). All these events and prints, as well as drama, employ the affective power, which McGuigan explored, to stir the political public debate. We have made an association between the court of Charles II and drama earlier, but applying the concepts of cultural public sphere and infotainment to political engagement represented by our prologues and epilogues makes it possible even to draw a link between the hunger for political news of the Exclusion Crisis and modern-day soap operas as analysed by McGuigan.

The association of culture and political debate in the framing texts is enhanced by further parallels between the theatres and the print. Aphra Behn’s epilogue to *The Feign’d Curtizans* warns the audience of dangerous consequences, if the theatre (written after the two theatres merged) needs to close:

So hard the Times are, and so thin the Town,  
Though but one Playhouse, that must too lie down;  
And when we fail what will Poets do?  
They live by us as we are kept by you:  
When we disband, they no more Plays will write,  
But make Lampoons, and Libell ye in spight[.] (Behn 1679, “Epilogue”)

Followed by a list of common vices that would thus become public, the association of poets with lampoons rather denigrates the playwrights (thus playfully exploring the gap between the authors and the speakers of prologues and epilogues),<sup>8</sup> but also achieves to associate print with the fictionality of drama, denying its authority as an agent of real political debate. Nevertheless, satire is always a double-edged weapon. Despite the number of satirical attacks on the political pamphlets, libels and lampoons, prologues and epilogues themselves enter the same “industry” when they make profit by being increasingly often sold separately as broadside publications (Danchin 1984, xviii–xx).

By drawing attention to the economic suffering of theatres and playwrights, Aphra Behn’s epilogue also contextualizes both the theatre and the profitable print

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<sup>8</sup> John Crowne went a step further in this dichotomy, when associating poets with priests and libel and asking for support of theatres as a space for gathering and social events: “Well, Sirs, damn Plays and Poets as you please, / But pray support a Play-house for your ease. / Ladies some Journeys to Hide. Park may spare, / Our empty Play-House ha’s enough fresh Air. / And Gallants pray support us not for Plays, / But to find Ladies here in rainy days” (Crowne 1679, “Epilogue”).

as an essentially economic, commercialized activity, in which the market and popular demand play a vital role. The painful economic dependence of theatres and playwrights on their audience is one of the stock themes in the prologues and epilogues of the period, as in Nathaniel Lee's epilogue to *Theodosius*: "The Pit and Boxes make the Poet dine, / And he scarce drinks but of the Criticks Wine" (Lee 1680, "Epilogue").

Considering the debates over the rise of the public sphere, it is also worth mentioning that the print and newly arising culture of political debates was primarily associated with the middle class of wealthy Cits, fashionable youth and the popularity of coffee-houses:

With Politick shrug, and notable wise Look,  
They censure Councels, who ne'r read a Book.  
The Citt, who with his Wife and hopeful Son  
Would come t' a merry Play, now all does shun,  
And on the Guard learns to let off a Gun.  
Others their Shops and precious Wares neglect,  
With their wise Heads the Nation to protect:  
Ev'n Bulks all day of Tenants are bereft;  
For News stitching, and singing Psalms are left.  
Each Coffee-house is fill d with subtle folk,  
Who wisely talk, and politickly smoke. (Shadwell 1680b, "Prologue")

Similarly, by the end of the crisis, in his comedy *City politiques*, John Crowne represented coffee-houses with their political debates as direct competition to the dilapidated theatres: "Then Coffee-Houses Theatres were grown, / Where Zealots acted in a furious tone" (1683, "Prologue").

The representation of coffee houses as a rival space in the theatrical framing texts is thus another common trope asserting the newly arisen political culture as a kind of popular entertainment that needs its audience and shares it with the Restoration theatre.

### 3. Restoration Theatre and Popular Culture

All the excerpts we have seen so far share a sense of dissatisfaction with the state of things. This can be and has been very easily attributed to the general anxiety of a society in crisis, to the fear of political turmoil, Popish plots, memories of the civil war, etc. However, a striking number of the framing texts comments specifically on the dilapidated state of theatres and on the low attendance caused

by rival interests. It seems therefore that although a lot has been written on the appearance of lower classes in the audience of Restoration theatre, there is still space for research in the relation of the official theatres to popular culture and *vice versa*. Considering the prologues and epilogues explored here, there was a clearly conceived, vital competition and the audience overlapped. The development of theatrical evenings in the eighteenth century testifies to the gradual change in the taste of the audience and its formative role for the stage. Though Restoration theatres were elite and directly supported by the Court, their sole association with poetry and “sophisticated” drama (reiterated repeatedly in Dryden’s framing texts) gradually changes, possibly enhanced by the market forces. Pierre Danchin has noted how, by the end of the seventeenth century, the changing trends result in the growing importance of the actor and the large number of plays written by actors themselves (attesting to the dominance of practise over education) (Danchin 1984, xxxii–xxxiv).

A brief overview of the Exclusion Crisis prologues and epilogues shows the variety of popular entertainment viewed as rival to the theatres, including the rope-dancing and fairs mentioned above, popular tales and plays about Robin Hood (Tate 1680, “Epilogue”), New Market horse races (Anonymous 1682, “Prologue”) and even executions: “Let us be Mute ’till the whole Truth comes out, / Not like the Rabble at Executions, shout” (Ravenscroft 1687, “Epilogue”). All of these do not occupy a separate space in the “popular” and do not attract a completely different audience. The audiences clearly overlap and the distinction between “elite” drama and “popular” entertainment, which the framing texts constantly try to reassert in discussions both of popular features of Restoration drama and in the satire on their competitors, falls apart.

Despite the prolific aesthetic debates over classical drama, French dramatic tradition and other subjects of controversy, authors of prologues and epilogues are apparently fully aware of the growing gap between aesthetic theories of elite, educated artists and poets, and the wide-spread demand for popular entertainment, sustained and enforced by the arising cultural marketplace. Some are ready to embrace these new cultural mechanisms, some, e.g., the Poet Laureate John Dryden, struggle with their acceptance and defiantly fight against them by harsh satire, vainly trying to reassert their aesthetic authority.

One of the typical metaphors reflecting the ambivalent position of playwrights and poets in this situation is the sexual representation of theatres, playwrights and actors as prostitutes. This widespread trope is not so obvious in cases like Aphra Behn’s *The Feign’d Curtizans*, where the young actress teases her audience for being “neglected at eighteen” (1679, “Epilogue”). The text does not make an explicit connection

between the actress's playful teasing and parading her youth and beauty, and the theatre as such, and yet, bearing in mind the context of other prologues and epilogues concerned with the "abandoned stage," the speaker stands in synecdochical relation to the whole theatrical company she represents. Other texts then make the association of theatres with prostitution more explicit, e.g., Nathaniel Lee in the epilogue to *Theodosius*:

Old Writers should not for vain glory strive  
But like old Mistresses think how to thrive,  
Be fond of ev'ry thing their Keepers say,  
At least till they can live without a Play.  
Like one that knows the Trade, and has been bit;  
She doats and fawns upon her wealthy Cit;  
.....  
So should wise Poets sooth an awkward Age,  
For they are Prostitutes upon the Stage:  
To stand on points were foolish and ill-bred;  
As for a Lady to be nice in Bed:  
Your wills alone must their performance measure,  
And you may turn 'em ev'ry way for pleasure. (Lee 1680, "Epilogue")

This epilogue lays bare the full economic (and aesthetic) dependence of theatres on the audience and though the capacity of the public (represented, tellingly, by a wealthy Cit) for critical, aesthetic judgment might be doubted, the power relations are quite clear, and the argument of authority gained by the actors and playwrights falls apart. Despite the constant scathing tone of the prologues and epilogues and mockery of popular culture and the rising public sphere, the authors are bound to follow the demand for popular entertainment:

We on the Stage stand still, and are content,  
To see you Act what we should Represent.  
You use us like the Women that you Woe;  
You make us sport, and Pay us for it too.  
Well, w'are resolv'd that in our next Play-Bill,  
To Print at large a Tryal of your skill;  
And that five hundred Monsters are to fight,  
Then more will run to see so strange a sight,  
Than the *Morocco*, or the *Muscovite*. (Banks 1682, "Epilogue")

Crisis of any kind always discloses hidden tensions and suppressed conflicts in a system. In our case, the Exclusion Crisis not only revealed the fragility



of the Stuart monarchy based on the divine right theory of kingship, but also triggered a transformative process in all layers and fields of the cultural landscape. A brief overview of the dominant tropes in the prologues and epilogues of the critical years shows how their authors were actively engaged in the political debates, but also the anxiety inherent in the transformative processes and economic pressure of the changing tastes of the public.

Due to their fundamental liminality, prologues and epilogues prove to be a great tool for the exploration of cultural dynamics of the theatre. Of course, the satire and performative character based on a set of conventions disqualifies these framing texts from being taken as evidence of the historical theatre-going experience, but the changes in recurrent motifs do point to the major issues and conflicts of the day.

Despite the assertion of playwrights' aesthetic authority and the harsh satirical mode of approaching the audience in the framing texts, the changing dynamics of the cultural marketplace made the theatres acutely aware of their economic dependence on the audience, and any assertions of moral superiority of art and poetry become dubious, similarly to the fragile distinction between elite art and drama, and popular entertainment. The gradual formation of the (cultural) public sphere is perceived as a threat to the conception of Restoration theatre as an elite place for poetry and traditional Aristotelian drama, and subsequent development shows the real force of the threat. As Mary Knapp shows in her monograph, the complaints about the state of theatre and the invasion of popular entertainment on the stage persist in the prologues and epilogues throughout the eighteenth century, when dance, pantomime, operas and other "minor" genres of the period became an inherent, if not the dominant, part of the theatrical evening (Knapp 1961).<sup>9</sup> Essentially, we might say that the same mechanisms of art competing with entertainment and commercialization are also reflected in much of the theatrical and media debates of the twenty-first century.

Apart from these inherently theatrical concerns, the prologues and epilogues we have read also shed a new light on other relations between modern-day media studies and the studies of Restoration culture. In their playful and comical discourse, they pose questions about the validity of the newly arising journalism, which is in its very essence and since the very beginning connected to economical profit and demand for popular entertainment. They reflect the anxiety related to the growing political engagement of wider masses of citizens, they reflect the confusion about the cultural function of drama and theatre standing in-between "timeless" art or poetry and pressing issues of the day which occupy and entertain the audience, but they also reflect how the political engagement and developing

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<sup>9</sup> On the transformation of the theatrical evening, see also Ennis and Slagle 2007.

democracy transform popular culture(s) and show how wide and fluid this concept is. Popular culture as represented by the theatrical framing texts is not limited to fairs, races and other kinds of entertainment listed above. It is a fluid concept influencing the official drama itself through the dominance of the visual spectacle over the text, noise over poetry, through the popularity of rhymes, jiggs, songs and farce, through the preoccupation of drama with political news of the day. And last but not least, through the huge popularity of prologues and epilogues, which in their existence between the stage and the audience, as well as between the theatre and the print, belong both to the sphere of drama and theatre and to the world of political news and coffee-house debates.

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**Kristýna Janská** is a PhD student at the Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague. Her main research interests lie in the field of political interpretation of Restoration literature, reception studies and reception theory. She graduated with an MA thesis entitled "The Reflection of the Exclusion Crisis (1678–1683) in Contemporary Literature" and her current PhD project is focused on the Czech reception of the works by the Brontë sisters.

**Contact:** [kristyna.janska@ff.cuni.cz](mailto:kristyna.janska@ff.cuni.cz)



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