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*Review of Hannah Cowley's Who's The Dupe? A Farce, Script-in-Hand Performance, Mordan Hall, St Hugh's College, Oxford, May 3, 2022.*

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“Oh, that I had you at Braze-nose Madam--I could manage you there,” says the scholar Gradus, frustrated in his courtship of the strong-willed modish Elizabeth Doiley. She is the daughter of Abraham Doiley, a pulled-up-by-his-bootstraps-from-charity-school Eastcheap merchant who is determined to see his only child married to a man of “larning.” It could not have been more appropriate to rehearse and perform a script-in-hand performance of Hannah Cowley’s two-act farce *Who’s the Dupe?* (first performed in 1779) in a college hall in the city of Oxford, the home of Brasenose Gradus’ college. <insert figure 1>

And that before an audience largely composed of a new generation of earnest scholars accustomed to, as Doiley puts it in open-mouthed admiration, “poring, and reading, and studying.” There was a striking contrast in the mix of gender and ethnicity in the modern-day audience to the all-male environment of eighteenth-century Oxford, which is shown in the play to have fostered the pedantry and pomposity of Gradus: he explains solemnly to Elizabeth--and much to Doiley’s approbation--that Rome’s empire was built on keeping women away from reading and writing to imbibe virtue at the loom and impart it at their breasts to the male heroes they birthed. Guaranteed to win a woman’s heart.

Elizabeth, of course, is the one who manages Gradus, ably assisted by her cousin and dependent companion Charlotte and the rakish Sandford, the close friend of Elizabeth’s true love interest, Captain Granger. They persuade Gradus to adopt the persona of a fop and rake

to win Elizabeth; Doiley's admiration turns to disgust, and he is duped into embracing Granger in the guise of another serious scholar as his new son-in-law.

There is no better way to understand the dominance of theatre in eighteenth-century culture than to see it performed. The translation from page to stage demonstrates the author's power to anticipate and play to the strengths of the actors, to deliver a plot driven by conflicts of generation, profession, and gender that is also rich with witty exchange and dynamic positioning between characters and types. Cowley's two-act farce not only delivered in this respect. It also reminded the scholars, performers, and audience involved in this production of the talent, especially among women playwrights, that could challenge the better-known playwrights of the period: Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Sheridan.

*Who's the Dupe?* was brought to Oxford by David Taylor, a professor of English at Oxford University. Collaborative work is at the heart of putting eighteenth-century theatre on its feet in this way. Taylor is a member of the R18 collective (<https://www.r18collective.org>), a group of international scholars committed to working with theatre makers to explore how undeservedly forgotten plays of the Restoration and eighteenth century can be reactivated for today's audiences. The production was by the Oxford-based Creation Theatre--experts in performing in unusual locations and making live digital theatre. The event was made possible by funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the United Kingdom. The performance was recorded by Tim Hands and Martin Higgins and will be publicly available to view for one week: and thereafter on request from teachers and researchers through the R18 website.

Colin Blumenau, the artistic director of the artist's management and production company the Production Exchange, directed the production using a script cut for performance by David Taylor. Blumenau's work has made an immeasurable contribution to those of us who study and teach the stage of the long eighteenth century. During his tenure

(1996-2012) as the artistic director of the Theatre Royal, Bury St. Edmunds, the building was restored to its original 1819 state, and he led an initiative to restore the repertoire of plays from the period through script-in-hand and full productions. Indeed, ten years previously, in September 2012, I remember driving feverishly from Oxford to Bury to attend a script-in-hand rehearsal in the Guildhall of Cowley's *Who's the Dupe?* alongside David Garrick's *Miss in Her Teens* (1747). Blumenau both understands and trusts this repertory as a living form not best accessed as a dead letter. He works with his actors to ensure that the play speaks to its audience: this is a forward-facing theatre, the nuance of its comedy best grasped paradoxically in the bigness of its performances.

On the morning of 3 May 2022, I joined six actors, Blumenau, David Taylor, and six Oxford University researchers in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century drama for the first read through of the script. By lunchtime, we had wrestled into submission the complex relationships driving the play, the quick-fire language, and its allusions. After lunch, the second read through had the play on its legs, with plenty of tangling and untangling of exits, entrances, scripts, props, and bodies.

<figure 2 about here>

At 5:30 P.M., the play was performed before a full house and recorded. Nicholas Osmond brought pathos as well as bluster to the part of Doiley, who reveals in the second act to the wily Sandford (George Howard) why he is so committed to securing a son-in-law with "larning": his attempts to further his career in the parish were thwarted by a fear of public speaking. Chloe Lemonius (Charlotte) and Dylan Corbett-Bader (Gradus) brought a genuine moment of heart-stopping attraction to the growing courtship between this unlikely couple. Foxey Hardman (Elizabeth) and Daniel Bravo (Granger) twinkled their attachment to each other while keeping an eye on the progress of their own romance with just the right blend of knowingness and innocence.

Postperformance discussion between the actors and the director and the audience was acute in identifying some of the key issues: Cowley's facility in providing parts for women of wit and sense that subtly put them in the driver's seat; the clash of male professions visibly blocked onstage (the merchant, the scholar, the captain). The actors talked about the challenge and the appeal of eighteenth-century scripts: so much language, so much going on. And in this play there was the particular challenge of getting your tongue round very technical language: Gradus' spouting of Latin and Greek, Granger's mock-heroic mangling of English that persuades Doiley he is the better classicist (the similarity between the two contrasting suitors' names is surely no accident).

Gradus has the last word in the play, announcing: "I have had enough of languages. You see I have engaged a Tutor to teach me to read the World." And: "[I]f I play my part there as well as I did at Brazen-Nose, your indulgence will grant me applause." Parts were played more than well, and the audience was tutored in the worldliness--and the appeal of that worldliness--in this neglected virtuoso comedy.

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FIG. 1. Poster of the 2022 script-in-hand performance of *Who's the Dupe? A Farce* by Hannah Cowley.

FIG. 2. Actors at the 2022 script-in-hand performance of *Who's the Dupe? A Farce* by Hannah Cowley. Photograph by Madeleine Saidenberg.