'Following the male gaze;
Visiting the Green Room at London's Opera House'

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It is late in the evening at London's Opera House, the King's Theatre. The opera on the bill has finished, and the ballet is beginning. Two of the principal dancers appear, dressed in white, and our observer, a middle-aged roué, smiles, and gradually becomes more animated as the dance proceeds. Finally, one dancer lifts her leg, goes up on her point, and throws her arms out in a graceful gesture. It's what he's been waiting for; the view of her ankle, the forward thrust of her bust, and the possibility, from his box, of being able to see up her skirt. His smile broadens, his eyebrow wrinkles, and his cravat becomes even more ruffled. His internal response to the appearance of the said dancer is suggested by the text below:

> For I vow, on my soul, I never saw such a leap;
> Or leg lifted so high, or such a bouncing step.

Superficially, the admiration of the dancer's technical accomplishments is a contradiction of the rather obvious lasciviousness suggested by the illustration, a lasciviousness made all the more inappropriate by the implied age of our roué, but, of course, the height of the lift of the leg, and the extent of the bounce of the step are essential to his enjoyment.

That women theatre performers were the subject of advances from the male members of the audience, or that they should be caricatured in such a way, comes as no surprise, and indeed, the construction of many prints and illustrations of dancers produced during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, shows that this was part of a caricaturist's stock in trade.[1] And a surprising number of these images construct the dancer with her leg held at a horizontal angle. The source for this pose appears to originate in the performance style of one of the most notorious dancers of the late 18th century, Mademoiselle Parisot (born *c*. 1778). 'The Parisot', as she was usually known, made her debut on 9 February 1796 in a new divertissement after a performance of the opera of *Piramo e Tisbe*:

> Mademoiselle Parisot, a new dancer from Paris, made her first appearance. She has a most beautiful figure, about 18 years and with a face full of expression. A little divertissement has been got up to introduce her to the public and she displayed powers in the grand character very exciting. Her attitudes are graceful, her step firm, her balance is positively magical, for her person was almost horizontal while turning as on a pivot on her toe. From the specimen of last night, she is a great acquisition to the Theatre; and if her talent for acting be equal to her dancing and figure, they will be able to give us ballets in good stile.[2]

The technical feat of 'turning as on a pivot on her toe' became the focus of commentary on Parisot's performance, most notably in the fabulous caricature by

[1] See Olive Baldwin, Thelma Wilson & Michael Burden, 'Images of Dancers on the London Stage, 1699–1800', *Music in Art: International journal for Music Iconography*, xxxxvi (2011), for images of dances for the period leading up to 'A peep at the Parisot'.
[2] *The Morning Chronicle*, 10 February 1796.

Isaac Cruikshank, 'A peep at the Parisot', published in 1796 by S. W. Fores. As constructed here, a large number of men are looking up Parisot's skirt as she turns on her point, and at least three of them are using opera glasses to enhance their view. It becomes clear that this pose was regarded as her essential achievement:

> Madame Parisot is not one of those elegant dancers who captivate by neatness of step; … her merit consists in the astonishing display of attitude, of which nothing more various and ingenious has even been exhibited; her figure, which is tall, and finely proportioned, seems exactly suited to her style of dancing. She possesses considerable taste, and, by singular adjustment of her arms, which are to *her* what a rope-dancer's balance is to *him*, she indulges in all the fantastic positions which art and fancy can suggest.[3]

And it is this particular pose or 'attitude' that is given to the principal dancer figure in the illustration in the image with which the remainder of this paper will be occupied.

The image, entitled 'The Opera Green Room, or Noble Amateurs viewing Foreign Curiosities', appeared in one of the two volumes of Bernard Blackmantle's 1826 *The English Spy*. These are volumes that are part of a particular English 'spying' tradition, in which an observer's eye is trained on the people and institutions of the London metropolis. Many of them do contain references to the theatres, and very interesting they are, even if the details are repetitive and tend to be useful as corroboration rather than as new material. Blackmantle - a pseudonym for Charles Molloy Westmacott (*c.* 1788-1868) - employed Isaac

Cruikshank (1789-1856) to produce the illustrations. Cruikshank shows the King's Theatre Green Room with *prominent* woman dancers; mostly *obscured* male dancers; and scattered groups of male non-performers dressed the height of Regency fashion.

Our attention is drawn immediately to the figure before the glass, the Spanish dancer, Mademoiselle Mercandotti, who had arrived for the 1822-1823 season. She was an immediate sensation both on and off the stage; one set of (un)theatrical reminiscences recalled that:

> …more than one scion of the fashionable world offered to surrender his liberty for life to the fascinating dancer. Ebers, then manager of the theatre, was pestered from morning to night by young men of fashion anxious to obtain an introduction to Mademoiselle Mercandotti…[4]

Mercandotti, dubbed 'The Andalusian Venus' by various commentators including Blackmantle, was associated with one of the great scandals of the age. On 8 March 1823, she was due to dance for a packed house for in a performance of Daniel Auber's ballet, *Alfred*, but she failed to appear. Manager John Ebers (*c*. 1785-*c*. 1830) came on stage to announce her indisposition, but:

> Knowing ones… guessed that she had been carried off by the "Golden Ball," whose advances had been very favourably received, and who had evidently made a strong impression upon the damsel; and a few

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[3] *The Monthly Mirror*, February 1796.
[4] Rees Howell Gronow, *Celebrities of London and Paris; a third series of reminicences* (London: Smith, Elder, 1865) 114.

> days after, the Morning Post announced that a marriage had taken place between a young man of large fortune and one of the most remarkable dancers of the age. The persons present at the marriage were the mother of the bride, Mr Ebers, and Lord Fife. [5]

As Walter Scott commented, 'few events in the fashionable world have excited more attention.'[6] Mercandotti's partner in this 'elopement', the 'Golden Ball', was Edward Hughes Ball Hughes (1799-1863), known in society as 'fabulously rich, handsome, a relentless hedonist, and a colossal gambler'.[7]

Cruikshank's image was published after this scandal, mediating any contemporary reading of the print. In fact, Blackmantle's text tells us that standing in front of the dancer is her 'now happy swain, the elegant Hughes Ball' with the Earl of Fife's hand on his shoulder.[8] Most of the men in Cruikshank's picture are non-performers, strangers or 'visitors', who, to a greater or lesser extent, are 'calling' on the dancers. Such visits formed a sub-set of one of the great theatrical past-times: 'going behind the scenes'. (In fact, 'A peep at the Parisot' shows two such backstage loungers, spilling enthusiastically from the proscenium door.) Going behind the scenes was a long-standing custom, partly arising from the seating on the stage, a privilege supposedly abolished by Garrick, but still in full swing in the early 19th-century, and which placed the visitor in proximity to the otherwise inaccessible Green Room.

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[5] Gronow, *Celebrities of London and Paris; a third series of reminicences*, 115-116.
[6] Walter Scott, *The Edinbrugh Annual Register*, vi (1823), 218.
[7] Ivor Guest, *Romantic Ballet in England: Its development, fulfillment, and decline* (London: Phoenix House, 1954).
[8] Charles Molloy Westmacott, *The English Spy* (London: Sherwood, Jones, and Co., 1825), 231.

There is no need here to describe the whole history of the phenomenon, except to say that orders banning 'going behind the scenes' were given from the time of Queen Anne onwards, but to little effect. Requests to desist can be found in 1712 at Drury Lane for a performance of *Epsom Wells*, where 'By Her Majesty's Command, no Persons are to be admitted behind the Scenes';[9] in 1748 for a performance of *The Provok'd Wife*, where was an order that 'no persons were to be admitted behind the scenes'; in 1782 at a staging of *The Gentle Shepherd*, at which, it was hoped, 'that none of Stewart's friends will expect to be admitted behind the scenes, as the audience will, and not without great reason, be much displeased at any such proceedings'; and in 1788 at the Royalty Theatre, where 'after the curtain is drawn up, [no-one] is admitted behind the scenes'.[10] As the comment here on *The Gentle Shepherd* suggests, the audience in the auditorium was not enthusiastic on the occasions that members of their cohort became part of the entertainment. Ebers recounts the tale of one particular audience, which, annoyed by their on-stage brethren coming too far forward, made its feelings known. One of the on-stage number insulted the audience with what were described as 'contemptuous gestures'; one of the guards stationed behind the scenes managed to strike a bystander with a bayonet; and in the resultant shambles, chairs were flung out of boxes and chandeliers broken.

This incident caused the Lord Chamberlain to seal the doors that led from the pit to the stage in an attempt to prevent a repeat of this outrage, but Ebers, early in his tenure, took the view that the matter was well in the past, and re-

[9] *The Daily* Courant, 23 Februray 1712.
[10] *The World*, 19 July 1788.

opened these passageways.[11] By 1838, one witness could give this account of going onto the stage between the mainpiece and the ballet:

> Between the acts it was common practice for many fashionable young men to leave the pit, and, by a secret door, gain admission to the stage. I joined the throng, and was well repaid by seeing the dancers practise their evolutions just before commencing the divertissement. It was not only curious, but highly entertaining, to witness their extravagant gesticulations, which greatly surpassed what they would venture before the curtain.... the divertissement was a short dance, introduced between the first and second acts of the opera, now discontinued. When the curtain was suddenly drawn up, you frequently saw shoals of the *petit maîtres* on the stage, scampering in all directions to avoid the hisses of the audience.[12]

The more serious opera-goer, though, as Blackmantle tells us, went behind the scenes actually to watch the divertissement:

> He surveys [the performance] from the side wings of the stage...; trifles a little *bandinage* with some well-known operatic intriguant, or favourite *danseuse*; approves the finished movements of the male *artistes*, inquires of the manager or committee the forthcoming novelties, strolls into the green room to make his selection of a well-turned ankle or graceful shape, and, having made an appointment for some non-play night, makes one of the

[11] John Ebers, *Seven Years of the King's Theatre* (London: W. H. Ainsworth, 1828), 79.
[12] William Gardiner, *Music and Friends* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, and Longman, 1838), I, 155-6.

> distinguished group of operatic cognoscenti who form the circle of taste in the centre of the stage on the fall of the curtain.[13]

Whether looking for an assignation on a 'non-play night' or not, hanging round the Green Room was a habit that was as long-standing as the existence of the Green Room itself. Accounts of events there are numerous: Fleetwood and Cibber sparred in it in the 1740s;[14] Peg Woffington and Kitty Clive and their defenders, James Raftor and Owen Swiney, fought there during a performance of *Henry IV Part I*, an altercation which Spranger Barry broke up 'lest the audience should hear full as much of the quarrel as of the play;'[15] and the theatrical investor, Mr Hugh Dives, frequented it nearly every day 'during the season its being open.'[16] For the Company, it was the centre of administration; when Drury Lane was under severe financial strain under Ellitson, it was recorded that the financial situation had been detailed in a notice that at 4pm had 'been put up at the Stage door and in both Green Rooms,'[17] while the contracts issued by Louisa Pyne (and others) timed players' arrival (and therefore lateness) by the Green Room clock.[18] Visitors obviously enjoyed themselves while there:

> The Green-Room in Covent Garden Theatre, was a most agreeable lounging place, a divan adorned with beauties, where one could pass a

[13] Westmacott, *The English Spy*, 226.
[14] Charles Macklin, *Memoirs of Charles Macklin* (London: Printed by James Asperne by Thomas Maiden, 1804), 100-101.
[15] Thomas Davies, *Dramatic Miscellanies* (London: Printed for the author, 1784), I, 232-34, and Tiffany Stern, 'The Green Room Scuffle', *Theatre Notebook*, lii/2 (1998), 115.
[16] William Parke, *Musical Memoirs, comprising an account of the general state of music in England from 1784 to 1830* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830), I, 64, for 1786.
[17] See James Winston, 16 July 1825, in *Drury Lane Journal: selections from James Winston's diaries, 1819-1827*, ed. Alfred L. Nelson and Gilbert B. Cross (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1974), 113.
[18] 'Rules for the English Opera Company', author's collection.

> pleasant hour in the society of charming women and men of gentlemanly manners, and from which was banished every word or allusion that would not be tolerated in a drawing room...[19]

And the furnishings enhanced this effect:

> The first Green-Room in Covent Garden Theatre was a withdrawing room, carpeted and papered elegantly; with a handsome chandelier in the centre, several globe lights at the sides, [and] a comfortable divan covered in figured damask running all round the walls...[20]

George Vandenhoff (1820-1884) was writing from memory in 1860, but Cruikshank's illustration of the 1819 Green Room at Drury Lane (complete with the all-important clock), suggests the same kind of rather tatty opulence he describes. But as a space, it was the subject of much prurient curiosity, which was responsible for such gossipy biographical portraits as Joseph Haslewood's 1790 *Secret History of the Green Room*.[21] The impression conveyed by much of the commentary is that the players indulged such rituals, although it is notable that Edmund Kean's pitch to take over the lease of Drury Lane in 1819 stipulated that there would be 'no Green Room Loungers', suggesting that there was a desire among the players to reduce this sort of traffic.[22]

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[19] George Vandenhoff, *Leaves from an Actor's Notebook* (New York: D. Appleton and Co, 1860), 50.
[20] Vandenhoff, *Leaves from an Actor's Notebook*, 51.
[21] Joseph Haslewood, *Secret History of the Green Room* (London: printed for J. Ridgway; J. Forbes; and H. D. Symmonds, 1790).
[22] *Collection of Memoranda relating to Drury Lane Theatre arranged by James Winston*, GB-Lbl Add ms 27, 831, ff. 110-112.

Covent Garden[23] and Drury Lane[24] had two Green Rooms, referred to as the 'superior and inferior green-rooms' by Charles Dibdin.[25] Covent Garden reserved the first one for the principal performers, and a second for those engaged in the ballet, the pantomimes, and so on; the principal dancers also had the use of the first Green Room. The King's Theatre, London's opera house, does not, however, appear to have had a Green Room, and indeed, the surviving 18th-century plans show only dressing rooms. It was Ebers who had one constructed and explained his decision thus:

> Another alteration which was shortly afterwards made, may be mentioned here; this was the erection of a Green Room, which the theatre had not before possessed… This room was certainly an advantage to the Theatre, as the dancers could now practise in it, immediately before their *entrée* on to the stage, which contributed to the excellence of the performances.[26]

And the King's Green Room was there to be visited by *The English Spy*:

> In this society I made my first appearance in the Green Room; a little narrow, pink saloon at the back of the stage, where the dancers congregate and practise before an immense looking glass previous to their appearance in public.[27]

[23] Vandenhoff, *Leaves from an Actor's Notebook*, 51.
[24] Winston, *Diaries*, 16 July 1825..
[25] Charles Dibdin, jr., *History and Illustrations of the London Theatres* (London: The proprietors of the "Illustrations of London Buildings", 1826), 30.
[26] Ebers, *Seven Years of the King's Theatre*, 80.
[27] Wesmatcott, *The English Spy*, I, 230.

The extent to which this might be deemed an accurate picture of the space is supported by the mention by Blackmantle's of the room's colour scheme; it appears to have been painted pink and gold throughout at this point.

Returning to Blackmantle's commentary on Cruikshank's illustration, we find that he describes Mercandotti as exhibiting her 'soft, plump, love-inspiring person' before the mirror, the 'immense glass' of which he has already reported. Cruikshank pictured her in what we have seen is the 'Parisot Pose', one leg lifted and raised on her point. In the comparatively small space of the Green Room, it might be thought that the effect would be lost, but the room's mirror gives us a second image, a reflection which the commentary seems to suggest represents the dancer in a different state to that the person that is in the room. Mercandotti herself is looking away from her image, with her head turned towards the foreground pair of men, one of whom is her husband. At the same time, the central group of three men is able to see up Mercandotti's ballet skirt, for the view of it is reflected in the mirror.

The mirror increases the possibilities to view the dancer; it assists the male gaze in the Green Room. But there are also two other assisted gazes. The first is that of the Earl of W_____, who, with 'a double Dolland's operatic magnifier in his hand', is '*studying nature* from this most delightful of all miniature models'; and he is (like our three central figures) able to see up Mercandotti's skirt. To have a Dollond was to have a product of one of the most prestigious optical firms in 18th-century London. Founded in 1750 by Peter Dollond (1731-1821), the inventor of bifocals, a Royal warrant ensured

the success of the business, which merged with Aitchison & Co to form Dollond and Aitchison, a firm that still exits as part of Boots. Dollonds introduced their single opera glass, a small telescope-like object; the double Dollond was a later innovation. The firm's products were a by-word, not only for excellence, but as a means to scrutinize theatrical images: of the 1780 scenery of *Harlequin Freemason*, the author commented that one scene was 'a picture which will bear the closest examination of the eyes of the connoisseur through the best opera glass, that was ever made by Dolland.'[28]

The second assisted gaze here is that belonging to the martially single Duke of D_____ who is lifting an eyeglass, suggesting a close (but not too close) scrutiny, described in the text as simply 'quizzing'. What he is quizzing is the dancer's profile, for as her face is turned towards *us*, this is perforce turned towards *him*. The explicit mention of the Duke's marital status suggests that Mercandotti's profile is being studied for its distinction (or lack of it) in an assessment of her suitability as a future Duchess, even though she is now otherwise attached.

The male gaze, then, is adjusted and increased in three ways: by the mirror, that allowed views of the dancer from every angle; by the eyeglasses, which appears to be assessing Mercandotti as a marriage prospect; and by the opera glass, which magnified the view up the dancer's skirt. The use of the eye-glass and the Dollond opera magnifier are, however, to be expected; the eye-glass was a prop for both male and female members of the audience both inside and outside the Opera House, while the opera glass was a theatrical accoutrement, usually

[28] *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser,* 30 December 1780.

depicted in the hands of men, but undoubtedly shared with the female members of the audience. The mirror, on the other hand, has been provided by the institution, by the theatre, apparently to assist the dancers in their warm up routines; as we have seen above, manager Ebers's opinion was that to have space in which such routines could be carried out 'contributed to the excellence of the performances'.[29]

They may well have done; indeed, the opera house backstage must been awkwardly arranged without a Green Room. And there nothing unusual in a Green Room having a mirror: as Vandenhoff reminisced, Covent Garden's was furnished with 'large pier and mantel glasses on the walls, and a full-length movable swing-glass' so that, on arrival, 'an actor could see himself from head to foot in one view, and get back, front, and side views by reflection, all round.'[30]

But when we look closer at the circumstances surrounding the construction of the Green Room at the King's, it becomes clear the extent to which the institution connived with the male members of the audience to provide them with Green Room entertainment, or as Blackmantle put it, for the men to make a 'selection of a well-turned ankle or graceful shape.'[31] From Ebers, what we also learn is that the Opera House's Green Room was originally built to satisfy people wishing to be able to visit the dancers in it before, during, and after the performances. He commented:

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[29] Ebers, *Seven Years of the King's Theatre*, 80.
[30] Vandenhoff, *Leaves from an Actor's Notebook*, 51; they are also mentioned in John Loftis, 'John Rich's 1744 Scenery inventory for Covent Garden,' *Restoration and 18th-century Theatre Research*, Dibdin, *History and illustrations of the London theatres*, 30.
[31] Westmacott, *The English Spy*, 226.

> I undertook this expensive addition at the earnest request of many of the subscribers, some of who were so eager for it, as to offer to put their names down as subscribers for one-half of the necessary outlay; however, the entire expense was paid for by myself.[32]

Blackmantle describes Cruikshank's Green Room visitors as 'noble and distinguished patrons of the opera'; our previously mentioned opera buff, who surveyed the performance from the side-wings of the stage, was exercising a 'privilege he is entitled as an annual subscriber';[33] and in Mercandotti's case, it was remarked that 'all the dandies who had the entrée behind the scenes surrounded her and paid her homage'.[34]

But they *did* need that entrée to get to her, and in constructing his Green Room, Ebers threw up a new ring around the male subscribers, for a knock-on effect was the more formal restriction of those who were allowed to go behind the scenes:

> Anxious as well to avoid an over-crowd behind the scenes, as not to refuse one gentleman while another is admitted, it is thought right to state, that the admission behind the scenes will be strictly limited, as it is at Paris, to the annual Subscribers.[35]

There were those who had an entrée by virtue of their subscription, and there were those who did not.

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[32] Ebers, *Seven Years of the King's Theatre*, 80.
[33] Wesmacott, *The English Spy*, I, 226.
[34] Gronow, *Celebrities of London and Paris; a third series of reminicences*, 114.
[35] Clipping, 1824, King's Theatre, THM.

What did the women members of the audience make of such institutionalised objectification? Presumably, there were occasions when some were just as interested as the men in viewing the female dancers in close proximity; so far no commentary has come to light. But a close examination of 'A peep at the Parisot', reveals that the lady in the box is training her glass *not* on Parisot, but on her companion; but she discovers that he is training his glass on her. Both are using a 'quizzing glass', and they may (like the Duke of W_____) be deciding on each other's suitability for matrimony, and neither is discovered looking up the Lady's skirt.