Anne Oldfield's Lady Townly: Consumption, Credit, and the Whig Hegemony of the 1720s

James Peck

Take my word, a new Fashion, upon a fine Woman, is often greater Proof of her Value, than you are aware of.

--Lady Betty Modish

Is fashion such a trifling thing? Or is it, as I prefer to think, rather an indication of deeper phenomena--of the energies, possibilities, demands and joie de vivre of a given society, economy, and civilization?

--Fernand Braudel

When Anne Oldfield took the stage as Lady Townly in Colley Cibber's The Provoked Husband, a number of admirers saw in her performance the culmination of her life's work as Drury Lane's longtime Leading Lady. Opening on 10 January 1728, Cibber's adaptation of the late John Vanbrugh's A Journey to London gave Oldfield the opportunity to do many of the things she did best. While her repertoire was various, as befitting an actress of her status, it was heavily weighted with coquettes, jilts, and fashionable women of an upper station. Lady Townly continued Oldfield's line of rebellious, captivating Ladies of Quality. Described in Cibber's dramatis personae as a woman "immoderate in her pursuit of pleasures," Lady Townly typified the recalcitrant flirt that Oldfield had been perfecting for nearly thirty years: she dresses extravagantly; she traverses the town engaging in such upper-class social rituals as theatre, parties, and gambling; she charms most men but enrages her husband; and in the enormously ideological tradition of exemplary comedy, at the end of the play she repents her errant ways, renounces her frivolous entertainments outside the home, and happily accepts a domestic existence subject to her husband's will. Oldfield concluded this performance of wit, defiance, and headstrong independence with a couplet summing up the then-emergent construction of woman as a properly domestic creature: "But now a convert to this truth I come--that married happiness is never found from home." Anne Oldfield had built a career performing the contradictions inscribed in such roles. As Cibber put it, "Of that sort were the characters she chiefly excelled in" (8-9).

Both Oldfield's coworkers at Drury Lane and the theatre's Whiggish patrons lauded her performance. Thomas Davies dubbed Lady Townly the "ne plus ultra" of the actress's career and praised the case with which "she slid so gracefully into the foibles and displayed so
humorously the excesses of a fine woman, too confident of her power, and led away by her passion for pleasure." 5 Charles Macklin noted that "Mrs. Oldfield formed the center of admiration, from her looks, her dress, and her admirable performance." He marveled that "when she came to describe the superior privileges of a married above a single woman, she repeated the whole of that lively speech with a rapidity, and gaiete de coeur, that electrified the whole house," and provoked "unbounded" applause. 6 Mary Granville Delany wrote to her sister that Oldfield "topped her part, and notwithstanding [the play] deserves criticism in reading, nobody (let them ever be so wise) can see it without being extremely pleased, for it is acted to admiration." 7 Cibber himself, writing as always for posterity, singled out Oldfield for lengthy encomium in his preface to the published edition:

May it therefore give emulation to our successors of the stage, to know, that to the ending of the year 1727, a cotemporary (sic) comedian relates, that Mrs. Oldfield was, then in her highest excellence of action, happy in all the rarely-found requisites that meet in one person to complete them for the stage.

Cibber's praise for Oldfield was, in fact, so voluble that his literary rivals frequently quoted it as a prime example of his graceless, purple prose. In the unfortunate phrase that Alexander Pope and Henry Fielding would later pillory as Cibber's most egregious malfeasance against writerly good taste, Cibber gushed that in her performance as Lady Townly, Oldfield "outdid her usual out-doing" (7).

The play was an unqualified hit, and evidence suggests that Oldfield's peers attributed much of its popularity to her performance. In spite of competing for [End Page 398] spectators with the sensationnally successful production of John Gay's Beggar's Opera that opened later that month at the rival Haymarket Theatre, The Provoked Husband played thirty-seven times that season alone. In his autobiography, Cibber boasts that it made more money than any play since the reopening of the theatres in 1660. In recognition of Oldfield's contribution to their substantial profits, the Drury Lane triumvirs voted her a substantial bonus at season's end: "Upon her extraordinary action in The Provoked Husband, the managers made her a present of fifty guineas more than her agreement." 8 Increasing her already hefty salary by nearly twenty percent, this bonus explicitly acknowledged the connection between Oldfield's artistic laurels and her market value. For the next two years, The Provoked Husband continued to fill the coffers of Cibber and his colleagues; it opened each of Drury Lane's two successive seasons and played frequently. However, Oldfield's untimely death from ovarian cancer in 1730 at the age of 47 curtained performances of Cibber's last financially successful play. According to Macklin, no other actress could match Oldfield's elan in the drama's central role:

Most of the performers who have played this part since her time . . . had too much tameness in their manner, under an idea of its being more easy and well bred; but Mrs. Oldfield, who was trained in the part by the author, gave it all the rage of fashion and vivacity. She rushed upon the stage with full consciousness of youth, beauty, and attraction. 9

Apparently, Anne Oldfield's ability to represent "youth, beauty, and attraction" was simply singular. By all indications, her Lady Townly was one of the hallmark performances of the 1720s.
As recent work in theatre history, performance studies, and cultural studies has gone an elaborate distance to demonstrate, such artistic success never occurs in isolation; it must be situated within the struggles for meaning and social power that are the inevitable locus of culture. This critical perspective—variously formulated through such epistemologies as marxism, psychoanalysis, semiotics, feminism, and poststructuralism—emphasizes the conjunctural character of artistic excellence. Aesthetic forms are situated among and refer to other cultural discourses and practices. They are necessarily linked to the social codes and signifying behaviors that constitute the realm of possible meanings and values within a given society. Consequently, an actor's "success" always arises within the interaction between cultural production and cultural politics. The scales of value that reward a performance are not intrinsic to the theatre but intersect with registers of belief engaged in the ongoing, necessarily conflictual process of constructing the culture at large. And because struggles over representation are intimately connected to struggles for social influence, aesthetic [End Page 399] forms produce ideological effects. In complicated ways tied to the complex processes of subject formation, works of art contribute to the construction or dissolution of cultural hegemonies. Thus, the praise heaped upon a particularly indelible performance is both a gauge of its psychic import to its audience and an index of its usefulness to the social bloc that endorses it. A performance that galvanizes a public invites a dual analysis: first, as a symptom of the anxieties that trouble that public; second (and not unrelated), as an articulation of its social interests. For the theatre historian, it is a hermeneutic opportunity—a concentrated, immensely overdetermined figure that must not simply be praised as the pinnacle achievement of one of "The Great Ones" but must be accounted for by reference to the signifying chains and material conflicts that render the performance so valuable.

From this perspective, Oldfield's popular Lady Townly must be situated in relation to the vociferously partisan audience of London Whigs that frequented the Drury Lane patent house where she performed. During the 1720s, ruling-class British politics were fractiously divided between Whigs and Tories. While it would be a simplification to see Drury Lane as an unequivocal or straightforward mouthpiece for Whig ideology, the theatre was on balance sympathetic to Whig interests and perceived by members of both factions as the Whig house. An incident on opening night of The Provoked Husband attests to Oldfield's participation in an explicit struggle for cultural hegemony waged at the site of this production. While not an obviously political play, The Provoked Husband nevertheless provoked a display of opposition sentiment from disenfranchised Tories and a counter-display of support from sympathetic Whigs. As recounted in Cibber's autobiography, his foes sought vengeance for his Tory-bashing The Non-Juror, a propagandistic adaptation of Molière's Tartuffe:

> On the first day of the Provoked Husband, ten years after the Non-Juror had appeared, a powerful party, not having the fear of public offense or private injury before their eyes, appeared most impetuously concerned for the demolition of it; in which they so far succeeded, that for some time I gave it up for lost.

Cibber's detractors imputed The Provoked Husband into this recent history of political struggle and sought to punish Cibber for the strident Whiggery of his earlier work. At the end of the premiere performance, Anne Oldfield both withstood Tory invective and rallied Whig support for the play. According to Thomas Davies, she faced off with a member of the anti-Cibber faction:

> Amidst a thousand applausees, Mrs. Oldfield came forward to speak the epilogue; but when she had pronounced the first line—Methinks I hear some powder'd critic
say—a man of no distinguished appearance, from the seat next to the orchestra, saluted her with a hiss. She fixed her eye upon him immediately, made a very short pause, and spoke the words poor creature! loud enough to be heard by the audience, with such a look of mingled scorn, pity, and contempt, that the most uncommon applause justified her conduct in this particular, and the poor reptile sunk down with fear and trembling.  

With a tactical shift of emphasis, Oldfield silenced a hostile member of the crowd and assured the success of the latest Drury Lane offering. More significantly, she provoked a noisy demonstration of the Whig's social power via that explicit performance of group identity—applause. When the audience of majority Whigs approved her clever rejoinder, they not only rewarded Oldfield's poise and wit; they also affirmed the values promulgated by her characterization and asserted their dominance as the ruling party.

Taken together, this opening night affair and the manifest popularity of her performance in general suggest that Oldfield's Lady Townly bore some relationship—albeit a highly complex and mediated one—to the growing but unstable hegemony of the Whig party. While the links between Oldfield's representation of an unmanageable, capricious Lady of Quality and the exigencies of party politics may seem at first glance insubstantial, Lady Townly indisputably occupied a privileged spot in the cultural imaginary of Whig London. As Cibber put it in when he dedicated the play to the Whig-sympathetic Queen Caroline, "public diversions are a strong indication of the genius of a people, . . . [and] The Provoked Husband is at least an instance that an English comedy may, to an unusual number of days, bring many thousands of His Majesty's good subjects together, to their emolument and delight" (3). The "rage of fashion and vivacity" that Charles Macklin so admired in Oldfield's performance clearly cathedcted some powerful drive within the audience that she summoned to the theatre. She satisfied—albeit in the provisional and passing mode of satisfaction that the fantasy structure of the theatre provides—some urgent collective demand of London's Whig ruling class. What, then, is the connection between Anne Oldfield's representation of this flibbertigibbet aristocratic woman and the political interests of the Whig party?

I want to argue that Anne Oldfield's Lady Townly provides an opportunity to unpack some of the complicated relationships between theatre, sexuality, and political economy in Augustan England. Throughout the 1720s the English ruling classes obsessively debated government financial policy. While fiscal matters were not the only divisive issues facing society, they were unquestionably paramount. Broadly speaking, Whigs represented the "monied interest"—an alliance between commercial leaders (large-scale, international merchants and bankers) and the wealthiest tier of London aristocrats who had mortgaged their estates to invest in England's lucrative overseas trading empire. Tories supported the "landed interest"—country aristocrats whose smaller fortunes and consequent influence were imperiled by the rapid expansion of British commerce. While this social map had formed in the years following the Revolution Settlement in 1689, the differences it marked were especially virulent during this decade. Ruling-class England was haunted by memory of the bursting of the South Sea Bubble in 1720. Throughout the 1720s, Whigs and Tories clamorously debated the proper response to this first calamitous crash of a national stock exchange.

As Jill Campbell, among others, has demonstrated, gendered representations played a vital role in the constitution of the financial psyche following the Bubble crisis. I want to argue that Oldfield's performance was situated at one such nexus of libidinal and monetary economies. In a context of noisy disputation and financial anxiety, Lady Townly articulated a version of the
aristocratic female that proved enormously valuable to the Whig commercial imaginary. Oldfield's offstage reputation combined with the plot of Cibber's play to render Lady Townly a powerful presence in the Whig psyche. Specifically, Lady Townly articulated two figures of femininity linked by association to the economic anxiety of the 1720s—the woman as a commodified consumer and the hysterical woman as a displaced representation of the hysterical British economy. Taken together, these images sutured a network of psychic and social contradictions that threatened to unhinge the Whig commercial subject and thus imperil the political and economic aims of the monied interest. Via her presence in the image repertoire of upper-class commercial men, Anne Oldfield's performance of Lady Townly thus contributed to the hegemonic aims of the London Whigs.

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As regards the image of the commodified woman, Lady Townly was one of Oldfield's many performances of the fashionable woman that placed her firmly within a Whig construct of femininity that celebrated the well-dressed Lady of Quality as a sign of England's imperial trading might. Over the course of Oldfield's career, England attained its status as a preeminent international trading power, and the display of imported goods took on added importance as a sign of social hierarchy and class identity. The Treaty of Utrecht (1713) expanded England's colonial reach, and the consumption of luxury commodities at home increased accordingly. One line of inquiry, led by the pioneering work of Neil McKendrick, Roy Porter, and John Brewer, has dubbed this period "the birth of a consumer society." 16 McKendrick and his colleagues demonstrate that in the context of the increased class mobility opened up by England's trading prowess in the early eighteenth century, the social discrimination demonstrated by good taste became a crucial marker of class belonging. 17 As the growing power of the commercial classes dispensed with mythologies of social value founded entirely in birth, the use of good manners coupled with the decorous presentation of consumer items achieved newfound preeminence as social practices that bound the ruling classes together and assured the legitimacy of social rank. Addison and Steele's ever popular Spectator was, among other things, a sort of user's manual for these ideological maneuvers. 18

In promulgating this new ideology of socially beneficial consumption, the Whigs found a ubiquitous figure in the well-dressed woman. 19 McKendrick has argued that women's clothing provided the paradigms of consumption that initiated the consumer society and influenced England through the century. 20 While female consumption was a vexed and unstable practice, provoking admiration even as it invited restriction, Whig panegyric saw in it both a sign of England's trading greatness and a pragmatic spur to its economy. As Laura Brown has exhaustively documented in The Ends of Empire, women's dress was a frequent synecdoche for the mercantile capitalist trading empire that the Whigs lauded. 21 From this perspective, upper-class women both motivated international commerce via their desire for shiny baubles and functioned as mannequins to display the bounty of the merchant's trading endeavors. In Spectator 69, for example, Joseph Addison offered this imperial taxonomy of female fashion:

The single Dress of a Woman of Quality is often the Product of an hundred Climates. The Muff and the Fan come together from the different Ends of the Earth. The Scarf is sent from the Torrid Zone, and the tippet from beneath the Pole. The Brocade Petticoat arises out of the Mines of Peru, and the Diamond Necklace out of the Bowels of Indostan. 22
Addison represents the dress as glorious evidence of the global purview of English trade. His eye traverses the garment and connects the erotic charge each item illicits to his trader's glimpse of its site of origin. In a classically fetishizing process, he schematizes the body of the Lady of Quality into a discontinuous series of commodity substitutes for his desire. The muff and fan "from the different ends of the earth" replace the woman's hands. A scarf from the "torrid zone" stands in for her shoulders and neck. In a zealous displacement of sexual desire, the gold-trimmed petticoat that covers her pelvis "arises out of the Mines of Peru"--in this context a vivid condensation of vaginal and mercantile imagery. And in a suggestion of anal eroticism that recalls Freud's association of feces and money, "the Diamond Necklace arises out of the Bowels of Indostan." Addison links sexual and commodity fetishes in an energizing articulation of Whig desire.

Oldfield spent her entire career promulgating this emergent construction of the woman as a conspicuous consumer. Specializing in the upper-class Lady of Quality, she was singularly gifted with the theatrical use of dress and excelled at roles that called for exquisite costume. Her contemporaries frequently remarked on the uncanny grace with which she donned the clothes of the upper class. An enormously fashion-conscious woman who adorned herself with the latest imported goods, practices of decorum and display were her métier. As Horace Walpole wrote, "Who should play genteel comedy well but people of fashion who have sense. . . . Mrs. Oldfield played it well because she not only followed, but often set the fashion." Richard Savage also admired her trend-setting attention to female finery. As he wrote in a memorial poem, "Such finish'd Breeding, so polite a Taste, her Fancy always for the Fashion past." Richard Steele respected her ability to make the extremes of fashion seem natural, and took her exceptional dress as a sign of a superior inner life:

[She] was always well dressed; the make of her mind very much contributed to the ornament of her body. This made every thing look native about her, and her clothes were so exactly fitted, that they appeared as it were part of her person. . . . There was such a composure in her looks, and propriety in her dress, that you would think it impossible she should change the garb you one day see her in, for anything so becoming, till you next day see her in another.

Though circumscribed by her profession's ambiguous social status, Anne Oldfield established the benchmark for elegance among upper-class British women.

Paintings of Oldfield attest to her graceful modeling of sumptuous attire. The publisher Edmund Curll, writing under the pseudonym William Egerton, selected a typical image for the frontispiece of his patchwork biography (see fig. 1). Copied from a painting by Jonathan Richardson, this portrait emphasizes the richness of Oldfield's clothing. Seated with a book in her lap, she wears a mantua of voluminous magnitude. Though the outline of her body underneath the gown is visible, the garment takes on a life of its own: plenteous folds of silk occupy half the painting; the painter's exacting brushwork suggests costly, luminous material; the fabric falls from her shoulders, exceeds the frame, and seems to continue ad infinitum; in the lower right corner, it bunches into an impossibly solid mass. The most interesting feature of the painting is the contrast between her pose and her clothing. Her facial expression is soulful and placid; it works in tandem with the book to create the impression of a thoughtful, discerning, and educated woman. The dress, on the other hand, glistens. The play of light and shadow energizes the entire painting and is primarily responsible for the suggestion of scintillating personality. While her visage and prop bespeak the intelligence and industry required for a successful career in the theatre, her costume
conveys the sparkling wit and ebullient manner described by her contemporaries. The dress bears the burden of representation for Oldfield's public persona as a mistress of consummate taste and witty repartee. The Latin inscription underscores the intimate connection between Oldfield's clothes and her reputation; it names her the "Ornament and Delight of the Stage."

Oldfield's authoritative grasp of fashion powerfully influenced roles written for her and contributed to the growing acceptance of consumption as a legitimate social practice. Authors aiming at a Drury Lane production habitually provided her with the opportunity to exploit a dazzling costume. For example, in the early success that elevated her to a first-rank player, Cibber's *The Careless Husband* (1704), Lady Betty Modish first appears brandishing an enormous scarf that she shows off to her friend Lady Easy: "Oh! my Dear! I am overjoy'd to see you! I am strangely happy today; I have just receiv'd my new Scarf from London. . . . 'Tis all Extravagance both in Mode and Fancy; my Dear. I believe there's Six Thousand Yards of Edging in it." The excessive decoration exemplifies what Veblen called "conspicuous consumption"; the attention-getting trim does not contribute to the supposed function of the scarf (to warm her shoulders), but advertises the social power of the wearer. In a manner that would have pleased Addison and Steele, Lady Betty assures her friend that her tasteful manipulation of this luxurious object may be trusted as evidence of her class status: "Take my word, a new Fashion, upon a fine Woman, is often greater Proof of her Value, than you are aware of." The scarf is not only beautiful; it is a transparent sign of her social rank.

Curll quotes this lengthy scene in order to convey Oldfield's personal manner and stage skills. He gives precedence to her skill with clothing: "the descriptions given of the allurements of dress, and other captivating charms, of wit, raillery, and conversation, for which Mrs. Oldfield was so peculiarly remarkable, make it appear self-evident, that none but she could have sat for the picture." Other writers and the Drury Lane managers seem to have shared Curll's estimation of her abilities; similar opportunities to self-consciously display a fashionable costume piece recur throughout her line. Many of Oldfield's most frequently performed roles, including such disparate characters as Milliman, Narcissa, Mrs. Sullen, Lurewell, Jane Shore, and Indiana, contain explicit references to the proper use of costume. I might suggest that such a "costume moment" was a definitive feature of Oldfield's repertoire, and that her enviable skill with clothing disseminated social practices associated with dress through the culture at large.

Oldfield was particularly adept with the era's most controversial example of conspicuous consumption, the petticoat. During the first two decades of the eighteenth century, the circumstance of the petticoat ballooned to massive proportion, and the garment illicited both gasps of admiration and sneers of disdain. As a 1711 issue of *The Spectator* observed, the undergarments "are now blown up into a most enormous concave, and rise every day more and more." Oldfield took considerable pains to appear in this latest fashion. In at least one season, she negotiated for the theatre to pay for a new petticoat that she would select and purchase. Drury Lane Treasurer Zacchary Baggs notes that in the season 1708-9 she "required, and was paid, ten guineas, to wear on the Stage in some Plays, during the Whole Season, a Mantua [End Page 406] and Petticoat." Oldfield favored the most expansive garments available. In one epilogue, she claimed to be "ribbed with nine Yards round of Whale-bone Petticoat." While many women were unable to negotiate the quotidian details of everyday life wrapped in copious yards of fine fabric, at Drury Lane Oldfield showed the way. As a fashion maven of the highest order, she regularly proved that genteel decorum could coexist
with sumptuous display.

Oldfield's choice of a voluminous petticoat implicitly endorsed a social philosophy that linked female dress to the glories of British trade. Due to its aggressive visibility, architectural complexity, and splendid display of a plethora of materials gathered from around the globe, the petticoat functioned as a particularly lively sign of mercantile capitalism. For example, in *The Fable of the Bees*, Bernard Mandeville paradoxically asserted the economic benefits of female vanity when he dubbed the "silly and capricious Invention of Hoop'd and Quilted Petticoats" one of the most momentous in English history. Addison trumpeted the advantages to "the woolen trade" and "the benefit[s] which thereby accrue to" the "Greenland trade... through the petticoats" great consumption of whalebone." Though they wrote toward somewhat divergent ends, Addison and Mandeville both framed the commodified woman as a sign of English prosperity and the petticoat as an exemplary instance of trade in action. They gazed at a stylishly embiblished female body and saw England's mercantile prosperity.

Oldfield's elegant dress implicitly endorsed a social philosophy that linked female dress to the glories of the British trading empire. It is highly unlikely that Oldfield was unaware of the political values promulgated by her display of elegant imported fabric. She was a lifelong supporter of Whig policies and the long-term mistress of two high-ranking Whig politicos; first Arthur Maynwaring and later Charles Churchill. Maynwaring actually set and implemented overseas trading policy in a series of positions at the customs office and was eventually appointed by the Whig power-broker, Lord Treasurer Sidney Godolphin, to the lifetime sinecure, Auditor of the Imprests, in which capacity he was charged with at least nominal oversight of Britain's imports and exports. Oldfield moved in these circles and performed regularly at Drury Lane; it is tempting to see in her display of yards upon yards of imported fabric an affirmation of Whig politics. At the very least, Oldfield's clothes appeared within in a system of signification that rendered them both a sign and an example of England's growing overseas trading networks. As she adjusted her long silk train, Anne Oldfield presented the Lady of Quality as the cause and emblem of England's imperial ambition.

Oldfield's peers experienced Lady Townly as the apotheosis of her career-long development of the Lady of Quality as a commodified consumer. By this time in her life she was a high-profile public figure closely identified with the fashionable coquette she so frequently played. A number of commentators who recorded their pleasure in her characterization singled out her choice of Lady Townly's costume pieces for special praise. Cibber, for example, intimately linked her manipulation of consumer goods to the success of her performance:

> The qualities she had acquired were the genteel and the elegant. The one in her air and the other in her dress never had her equal on the stage, and the ornaments she herself provided (particularly in this play) seemed in all respects the paraphernalia of a woman of quality.

As Cibber sees it, her manners and her clothes worked together to complete a compelling representation of aristocratic femininity. In addition to her persuasive costume choices, the plot of the play presented Oldfield's sartorial elegance in a propitious light. Cibber contrasts Lady Townly's good taste to the déclassé vanity of the country poseurs Mrs. Wronghead and her daughter Jenny. Newly come to London, these witless spendthrifats charge through the shops of London buying every expensive trinket they come across and running the bumbling head of
their household, the delusional parliament-man Wronghead, dangerously into debt. As Lady Wronghead puts it, "Why dear, do you think I came hither to live out of the fashion? Why the greatest distinction of a fine lady in this town is in the variety of pretty things that she has no occasion for" (112). In this narrative context, Oldfield's refined sense of style would have resounded very powerfully. Juxtaposed against a parodic representation of female consumption run amok, Oldfield proved that it was possible to wear these clothes with grace, ease, and the seeming nature that rendered them such a powerful guarantor of class legitimacy. Lady Townly displayed for the Whig patrons of Drury Lane the decorous fruits of their trading labors. Far from signifying merely an apolitical fascination with lovely things, Oldfield's display of beautiful clothes affirmed England's identity as a great trading nation and supported a Whiggish version of the national interest.

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In addition to presenting another in Oldfield's long line of fashion-conscious female consumers, Oldfield's performance as Lady Townly linked the commodified woman to the central issue of Whig economic policy in the 1720s: the ramifications of the Whig ministry's credit-based financial policies. Following the Glorious Revolution in 1688, English technologies of money and trade underwent rapid changes. The Whig hero William III brought with him from Holland an array of economic practices based on credit financing. Such techniques as the bank loan, the stock market, and the government debt achieved unprecedented prominence in the conduct of monetary affairs. By the early years of the eighteenth century, England was heavily in debt and the entire economy organized by interlocking systems of personal and public credit. While credit financing subsidized England's imperial expansion and was largely responsible for England's new status as a world power, in 1720 the disastrous events of the South Sea Bubble made painfully manifest the dangers of credit and nearly bankrupted the nation. In January of 1720, the heavily indebted Whig government endorsed a plan whereby holders of the national debt could exchange their government bonds for shares of stock in the South Sea Company, the international firm with monopoly rights to trade in the New World. As many government creditors bought into the scheme, a flurry of speculation exponentially increased the price of South Sea stock. However, in October of that same year, fear that the stock was overpriced [End Page 408] spread with equal frenzy. The market crashed. Many individuals lost their fortunes, many businesses watched helplessly as the value of their stock plummeted, and the government, by virtue of its implication in the affair, teetered on collapse. Politics throughout the 1720s divided over contrasting responses to the Bubble. Under the leadership of Walpole, the Whigs advocated a return to the practices of government financing and public stock that had led to the Bubble scare. They argued that these technologies of Public Credit were essentially sound and that if managed more carefully would generate significant wealth for the nation. The Tories, led by Bolingbroke, charged that Public Credit was an irresponsible, foolhardy way to finance a government, that the directors of these large commercial enterprises were venal self-serving scoundrels, and that only an irredeemably corrupt government would ally itself with businesses that had so imperiled the welfare of the nation. 35

In this context of political fractiousness and widespread distrust of the ruling Whig ministry, I want to suggest that Colley Cibber--a servile Whig who in three years would be rewarded the title of Poet Laureate for his loyalty to the Whig cause--performed a crucial service for the ruling ministry. In psychoanalytic terms, it might be said that Cibber's The Provoked Husband dreamt the anxious dream of the Whig hegemony in the late 1720s. A series of displacements structured into the plot of The Provoked Husband actually project the vociferous attacks of the
Tory opposition away from the commercial and government leaders at whom they were aimed onto a series of social figures only peripherally associated with Whig centers of power. The intertwining narratives create a field of political, economic, and ethical anxiety around the play's exemplar of ruling class Whiggery, Lord Townly, only to displace the moral questions besieging the Whig leadership into less volatile social spheres. Thus, the country bumpkin, Mr. Wronghead, the scheming social-climber, Count Basset, and--most influentially--the consuming woman, Lady Townly, all field criticisms that were in fact directed at ruling-class Whigs. *The Provoked Husband* established a psychic topography that linked political and economic anxieties provoked by the South Sea Bubble to cultural figures not connected with the Whig leadership. The play helped maintain Whig rule by displacing the anxieties it provoked away from the wealthy aristocrats and commercial men who were the true beneficiaries of Whig policies onto social types that might be chastened in surrogation for the failings of the Whig government.

The play presents a constellation of social and economic problematics characteristic of Whig ideology. The central narrative focuses on a violent domestic squabble seemingly distinct from the political strife of the day. Lord and Lady Townly, played by the acting team of John Wilks and Anne Oldfield, debate the proper relationship of the wife to public and private spheres. Lord Townly advocates the Whiggish position, promulgated by such influential reformers as Richard Steele, that women ought to confine their rituals of consumption to the domestic sphere: "When [wives] fly wild about this town, madam, pray what must the world think of 'em then?" (14). Lady [End Page 409] Townly counters that an aristocratic wife has the right to enjoy herself outside the home with men other than her husband. In one of the great set speeches of Oldfield's career, Lady Townly insists:

> Wives have infinite liberties in life, that would be terrible in an unmarried woman to take... In the morning: a married woman may have men at her toilet, invite them to dinner, appoint them a party in a stage box at the play, ... take a frolicsome supper from an India-house, perhaps (in her *gaiete de coeur*) toast a pretty fellow, then clatter again to this end of town, break with the morning into an assembly, crowd to the hazard table, throw a familiar levant upon some sharp lurching man of quality, and if he demands his money, turn it off with a loud laugh, and cry--you'll owe it him, to vex him.

As performed by Oldfield, this catalogue of female consumption provoked enthusiastic applause. As Charles Macklin recounted, "she repeated the whole of that lively speech with a rapidity, and *gaiete de coeur*, that electrified the whole house." 37 The quarrels of husband and wife finally distill to financial disagreements. Lord Townly seeks to curtail his wife's excessive consumption, both by limiting the amount that she spends and by discouraging her from the public arenas in which she spends it. Lady Townly insists that as a woman of quality she may spend what money she has as and where she pleases.

Although their arguments do not touch on the political controversies of the 1720s, Cibber endows Lord Townly with personal traits typical of the Whig oligarchy that was running Britain at this time. He is prodigiously wealthy, as demonstrated by the five hundred pound note he gives his wife in the first scene. He refers to his country estate, Bellmont, though he and Lady Townly live in the London parish of St. James--the city's priciest neighborhood. As a member of the aristocracy, he does not work, though he maintains honorable relations with the tradesmen who supply his home with luxury goods. His best friend Manly is an outspoken
Whig. And the moral values of domesticity, respectability, and frugality that he propounds throughout the play associate him with the ideologues of Whig social protocol. In sum, Lord Townly is a London aristocrat, a member of the social group that held a controlling interest in the financial institutions that owned both the rights to the nation's trade and its debt. Though his politics do not explicitly surface, the social context in which he moves identifies him as a member of the Whig ruling class. 38

In addition, the subsidiary plots of the play situate Lord Townly in relation to the specific charges of corruption and political instability leveled at the Whigs by writers of the opposition throughout the 1720s. In the story of Mr. Wronghead, the role that Cibber wrote for himself, the author dramatizes rather precisely the accusations of Bolingbroke's circle that the Whig regime was corrupt because it secured political loyalty by buying off members of Parliament whose incomes were invested in the large commercial enterprises that owned the government debt. Wronghead is a parliament-man recently arrived in London to assume his newly won seat. Having bribed his way into office, he hopes to secure a well-paying position at Court that will help him redeem his heavily mortgaged estate. After a series of farcical episodes in which he proves himself an incompetent and self-serving politician, he flees London to keep his heavy-spending wife and daughter from bankrupting him entirely.

Bolingbroke's circle charged that by auctioning political influence, the Whig court encouraged this combination of corruption and ineptitude. The other sub-plot, the story of the faux aristocrat Count Basset, dramatizes the Tory charge that the credit-based commercial economy created a world in which human personality was ostensibly fraudulent with no connection to true value. Count Basset, "a gamester," attempts to hustle a financially advantageous marriage with Wronghead's daughter Jenny by impersonating a member of the aristocracy. The Count's persona is completely fictive, a fraud perpetrated on anyone who will believe in his performance. Bolingbroke's circle asserted that in the world of economic upheaval and class instability created by credit, this sort of dishonesty was the predominate mode of social being.

While the nuptial strife of Lord and Lady Townly might at first glance seem unrelated to issues of corruption and credit, in fact Cibber's play displaces anxiety about the credit economy into the domestic sphere via the representation of Lady Townly's addiction to gambling. 39 Lady Townly's gambling is her most dangerous vice and her husband's most engrossing anxiety. I am suggesting that Lady Townly's obsessive love of gambling articulates Whig anxiety about the technologies of credit upon which their commercial empire was founded.

The symbolic links between gambling and the credit-based economy were strong and pervasive. The stock market was widely seen as a form of gaming and the socially invidious "stock-jobbers" frequently figured as gambling "sharers." In the opposition paper, The Craftsman, for example, Bolingbroke argued that for England to continue to rely on credit following the South Sea Bubble was precisely to succumb to a gambling addiction:

I am sensible that the Spirit of Stockjobbing, like the itch of all other Gaming, is very hard to be cured. . . . All People, in their turns, exclaim against it, and yet most People are tempted to run into it; and as it first grew out of the Misfortunes of our Country, I heartily wish that it may not be made Use of to perpetuate and increase them. 40

Bolingbroke cautions that if allowed to flourish, the scintillating allure of the stock market will
lead England to ruin. The incisive pen of Alexander Pope also linked Whig economics to aristocratic gaming. In his *Epistle to Bathurst*, he satirized the Whig's credit-based policies, deeming the newly fashionable card game Quadrille (incidentally, one of Lady Townly's favorite diversions) "the nation's last great trade." Positioned in a signifying network that linked gambling to finance and female fashion to international trade, Oldfield's portrayal of Lady Townly the elegant gambling addict articulated in displaced form the commercial anxiety of the Whig party in the wake of the South Sea Bubble. She vivified the psychic anxiety of Whig commercial man, representing it in the containable image of the consuming woman.

Figuring Whig anxiety about the credit economy via the representation of the woman was by no means a strange quirk of Cibber's admittedly prolix imagination. It was in fact a common Augustan practice, with precedents among Whiggery's most articulate spokesmen. As J. G. A. Pocock has argued, in its early years, finance was not the stolid, masculine occupation it was to become in the nineteenth century. It was in fact a dangerously feminized, unpredictable enterprise. Both Trade and its handmaid, Credit, were regularly figured as unstable women in need of coddling and flattery. In another Whig text of the early eighteenth century, Daniel Defoe's *Review*, this prolific apologist for enterprise laments the fickle femininity of finance:

> Her name in our language is called CREDIT. . . . This is a coy Lass, and wonderful chary of her self; yet a most necessary, useful industrious creature. . . . If once she be disobliged, she's the most difficult to be Friends again with us, of anything in the world. . . . 'Tis a strange thing to think, how absolute this Lady is; how despotickly she governs all her Actions: If you court her, you lose her, or must buy her at unreasonable Rates; and if you do she is always jealous of you, and Suspicious; and if you don't discharge her to a Title of your Agreement, she is gone, and perhaps may never come again as long as you live.

Expanding from private to public credit, Addison employed this figure to depict England's credit-based system of government finance. In an early issue of the *Spectator*, Public Credit appears in a dream. Discovered in the Bank of England, she is surrounded by emblems of the Ancient Constitution and the Revolution Settlement, and sitting among bags upon bags full of money:

> She appeared indeed infinitely timorous in all her Behavior; And, whether it was from the Delicacy of her Constitution, or that she was troubled with Vapours, as I was afterwards told by one who I found was none of her Well-wishers, she changed Colour, and startled at everything she heard. She was likewise (as I afterwards found) a greater Valetudinarian than any I had ever met with, even in her own Sex, and Subject to such Momentary Consumptions, that in the twinkling of an Eye, she would fall away from the most florid Complexion, and the most healthful State of Body, and wither into a Skeleton. Her Recoveries were often as sudden as her Decays, insomuch that she would revive in a Moment out of a wasting Distemper into a Habit of the highest Health and Vigour.

As Pocock points out, this image of Credit as a hysterical woman was a specifically Whig metaphor. Not so much an attack on Credit as a cautionary tale about her fitful temperament, this widespread trope imaged the exigencies of commerce in feminine terms that might be mastered and tamed by an implicitly rational masculinity. It projected the unpredictable fluctuations of business onto the site of the woman and constructed a
complementary masculinity purportedly untainted by the hysteria of the market.

This image of the woman as a displaced representation of Whig commercial anxiety culminates in the extraordinary scene that precedes Lady Townly's conversion. Lady Townly has been carousing all night and gambled away her entire fortune at the hazard table. The scene begins, according to Cibber's stage directions, "as just up she walks to her toilet" (129). Lady Townly appears en deshabille, wearing a nightgown that in Oldfield's performance was probably trimmed with hideously expensive imported lace. Her servant, Mrs. Trusty, helps her to her dressing table, and she sits amid the frivolous knick-knacks of feminine beauty. As we have seen, women's dress and the items to be found on a woman's dressing table were lively signifiers of mercantile capitalism in Augustan England. The scenic surround, the costume, and the presence of a personal servant evoke the consumer society of which Oldfield was such an influential exemplar. She laments to Mrs. Trusty that she is "broke, ruined, plundered! Stripped, even to a confiscation of my last guinea." She lacks even "a single guinea to try my fortune" at the dice table. She describes the tragic trajectory of her evening: "Sit up all night; lose one's money; dream of winning thousands; wake without a shilling, and then--how like a hag I look" (132). Overcome with pity, Mrs. Trusty remembers that her mistress recently had given the steward, Poundage, fifty pounds to pay off a debt to the mercer, Lutestring, a purveyor of fine silks. Lady Townly commands, "If he has not paid it, run quickly, dear Trusty, and bid him bring it hither immediately" (131). In a scene of extraordinary improbability, Mrs. Trusty interrupts Poundage paying the tradesman at the front door of the Townly's house. She calls the steward up to the dressing room and asks "Where's the fifty pound?" He responds, "Why here it is. If you had not been in such haste I should have paid it by this time; the man's now writing a receipt, below, for it" (133). Mrs. Trusty wrests the bag from Poundage and returns him to the front door empty-handed. She then "pours the money out of the bag" into Lady Townly's reach (134). In an intemperate display of commodity fetishism, we may imagine Lady Townly the exquisitely adorned dice-player sitting at her dressing table running her hands through the guineas that represent payment for a debt she owes but has elected not to pay. Amid the products of mercantile capitalism, she clutches at money that by all rights belongs to someone else and fantasizes about betting it at a gaming table where it will in all likelihood be lost and her creditor cheated of his work.

With impressive concision, this image condenses the accusations aimed at the Whig leadership by opposition Tories. Given the context in which it appears, Lady Townly's gambling bankruptcy may be seen as a symbolic repetition of the trauma of the bursting Bubble seven years earlier. In this context of financial anxiety, the Tories charged that the credit-dependent commercial society created venal people whose social authority was based on utterly fictitious fantasies that would one day collapse to the detriment of those that depended on them. Lady Townly connects a prevailing, misogynist image of woman as conspicuous consumer to the credit economy that made that consumption possible. In so doing, she takes upon herself the accusations of greed, fraud, and fictive personality that were aimed at the Whig commercial leaders who in fact reaped the rewards of England's growing empire. [End Page 413]

The symbolic link between Lady Townley and Whig credit is reinforced by Lord Townley's strange obsession with the ways his reputation is threatened by his wife's gambling excesses. He is anxious about the potential for financial ruin to which her gambling exposes him, but positively fixated on its ramifications for her chastity: "women sometimes lose more than they are able to pay; and if a creditor be a little pressing the lady may be reduced to try if, instead of gold, the gentleman will accept of a trinket" (83). When Lady Townly counters that he is merely avaricious and that she "might take any pleasures, I find, that were not expensive," he counters that all of her behavior reflects upon him: "Don't let me think you only value your
chastity to make me reproachable for not indulging you in everything else that's vicious. I, madam, have a reputation too to guard, that's dear to me as yours" (83). In the end, he throws her out of the house in large measure to protect that reputation: "He'll make a better figure in the world that keeps his misfortune out of doors than he that tamely keeps her within" (138). Lord Townly's obsession with his reputation suggests nothing so much as the epistemological terror that obtains in a credit-based society. In a credit system, after all, reputation is value. In such a context, identity is a manifestly intersubjective fiction, dependent on outside confirmation for its social Being. This frightening reality did not escape Whig leaders; they simply argued that while the credit economy did threaten to destabilize longstanding social contracts, the risks could be managed for the overall good of the populace. The representation of Lady Townly as a hysterical gambler, then, offers nothing so much as a vivid portrait of the anxieties that accompanied the Whigs' tentative, fascinated embrace of the credit-based society.

Crucially, The Provoked Wife concludes with a scene of repentance that tames Lady Townly's excess and recuperates the consuming woman for Whig ideology. As she is coddling the money at her dressing table, an argument erupts between the mercer Lutestring and the steward Poundage. Lord Townly overhears their acrimony and bursts into his wife's dressing room: "How comes it, madam, that a tradesman dares be clamorous, in my house, for money due to him from you?" (135). Lady Townly's shameful recklessness is exposed and her husband banishes her from the house. While he pledges to maintain her financially, he blames her irresponsible consumption for their problems and cuts her off from any expenditure in excess of her needs: "State, equipage, and splendor but ill become the vices that misuse 'em. The decent necessaries of life shall be supplied--but not one article to luxury! Not even the coach, which waits to carry you hence, shall you ever use again!" (139). In an archetypal scenario of exemplary comedy, Lady Townly repents and pledges to take upon herself the respectable persona of the domestic wife. She sums up her new world-view with a Cibberian moral that ends the scene: "Nature points the way: let husbands govern, gentle wives obey" (159).

In what was fast becoming one of the most successful ideological maneuvers of the eighteenth century, the economic anxieties created by the inherent instability of a credit economy are resolved by creating a domestic space into which the madness of the market does not enter. As James Thompson has argued persuasively, "the representation of the treasured wife is the linchpin to the process of removing the taint of exchange from the domestic sphere, for she functions as a deliberately archaic, [End Page 414] decapitalized figure." 45 When Lady Townly renounces gambling and pledges to find her happiness at home, she acquiesces to a feminized domestic space apart from the volatility of commodity exchange. She makes home as a sight of virtue and true feeling so that her husband may venture out into the morally compromised, fictive land of commerce knowing that his irrefutable value is guaranteed by the wife he leaves behind.

Anne Oldfield's performance as Lady Townly was such a resounding success with the Whig public for whom she performed at least in part because it promulgated an increasingly hegemonic ideology that displaced anxiety about the capriciousness of a credit-based society off of the commercial men who were its chief beneficiaries and onto the image of a consuming woman who might be safely confined to a domestic sphere. Notably gifted with the items of dress and costume that powerfully evoked British trade, Oldfield performed an image of femininity that supported the commercial regime--both by creating the desire for the consumer goods that supported overseas trade and by positioning the consuming woman as a psychic displacement of the potentially enervating anxiety that the Whigs felt about the credit upon which their wealth depended. It is not an exaggeration to say that in the wake of the South Sea
Bubble, Anne Oldfield's Lady Townly helped maintain the stability of the English economy. As Prime Minister Robert Walpole was skillfully at work restoring public faith in the credit-based society, Anne Oldfield was skillfully at work performing its most terrifying aspects in a fictive domestic space removed from the scenes of exchange where the terrors of credit might do the market real harm.

* * *

In a propitious image, the prompter William Chetwood called Anne Oldfield's beauty a "meridian lustre, a glow of charms not to be beheld but with a trembling eye!" On one level, Chetwood's use of the word "meridian" is a simple compliment. It indicates that her beauty was of the highest order. However, it also reveals the cultural frame within which her beauty arose. A meridian is a circumference on a globe that extends from one pole to the other. Chetwood's imagery suggests that Oldfield's beauty is imbricated in the vast trading network that English commercial society was in the process of establishing. As I have argued, the femininity that Anne Oldfield performed was deeply connected to her skill with the objects of consumer desire and international trade that were transforming British society. Chetwood's description of Oldfield evokes nothing so much as Marx's famous description of the commodity: "A commodity appears, at first sight a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties." The queerness of the commodity did not escape the leaders of Augustan commercial society. Even as they advocated the credit society and invested in England's financial institutions, they sought to contain the radical instability and modes of fictive personality that capitalism was rapidly creating. The anxiety with which Augustan commercial man beheld the commodities he traded is, in fact, nicely expressed by Chetwood's adoring but anxious gaze at the era's preeminent actress. The men of commerce understood only too well that the credit upon which their wealth depended was, like that enormously valuable consumer object Anne Oldfield, "a glow of charms not to be beheld but by the trembling eye."

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James Peck is the head of the directing program at the Playwrights Horizons Theater School and is working on his dissertation in the Department of Performance Studies at New York University. He has directed at theatres across the country and published in The Drama Review, Women and Performance, and other journals.

Notes

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3. The most recent biography of Oldfield is Joanne Lafler's The Celebrated Mrs. Oldfield: The


32. Egerton [Curl], *Faithful Memoirs*, 169.


38. Cibber draws upon a strategy identified by Kathleen Wilson in *A Sense of the People: Politics, Culture, and Imperialism in England 1715-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 117-36. Wilson shows that in the context of partisan struggle, both Whigs and Tories sought to win arguments by withdrawing from the contest to occupy ostensibly party-neutral positions. While Townly is obviously a Whig, he is elevated above the chattering of political babble and thus rendered an even more powerful presence.

39. For a complementary analysis, see Laura Rosenthal's reading of gambling in Cibber's *The Lady's Stake* and Centlivre's *The Gamester* and *The Bassett Table; Playwrights and Plagiarists in Early Modern England: Gender, Authorship, Literary Property* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 230-42. Although Rosenthal is primarily concerned with issues of textual property, she also links the figure of "the lady gambler" to the fiscal innovations of the Financial Revolution.

40. Henry St. John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke, *The Craftsman* (London, 1731), 288. This edition is a compilation of *Craftsman* essays from the years 1728-1732.


44. Addison and Steele, *Spectator*, 1:5.
