

THE TRANSATLANTIC IRISHMAN:
MACKLIN'S NATIONALISM IN THREE CONTEXTS

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Charles Macklin's *The True-born Irishman* was received with rapturous enthusiasm at its debut at the Crow Street theater, Dublin, on May 14, 1761¹. Six years later, a revised and re-titled version, *The Irish Fine Lady*, made a disastrous first showing in London, at Covent Garden – it was such a failure, in fact, that Macklin felt compelled to make an extemporaneous apology to the audience for its defects. Subsequently, Macklin managed to keep his celebrated career, as actor and playwright, intact, but *The Irish Fine Lady* vanished forever from the London stage. Still, *TTBI* was not sent home once and for all – some years later, it would make an auspicious journey across the Atlantic Ocean, to find enthusiastic and prolonged success in the theaters of the newborn United States; Macklin's nationalist polemic, while explicitly Irish, appealed instantaneously to American audiences in the immediate aftermath of the Revolutionary War. Through its representation of Count Mushroom, the effeminate, lascivious English man of the world, *TTBI* performs a degraded, emasculated English identity; via Mushroom, Macklin castigates the corruptive influence of the English on land, language, economy, and governance. At the same time, *TTBI* deftly figures its protagonist, Murrough O'Dogherty, in such a way as to elide the very real religious, class, and ethnic differences that wracked Ireland in the 18th century, in order to present a uniquely resilient, unified Irishness, grounded firmly in the ancient Irish aristocracy but updated to navigate 18th century contexts. These paired rhetorical gestures – on the one hand, lambasting womanish English frivolity and, on the other, obscuring difference in order to perform unity – were enormously appealing to the American stage, which did not yet have access to a local nationalism of its own. Early American playwrights, stage directors, and theater companies had no choice but to work *through* extant English

¹ Friel 166

archetypes in beginning to define their own tradition. Like Murrough O'Dogherty in *TTBI*, American audiences and playwrights defined and celebrated their national identity in contradistinction to Englishness. As for Macklin himself, over a spectacularly long career, he found need to shift from Irishness to Englishness and back again, in order to perform versions of his identity that would prove amenable to his audiences, in Covent Garden, Crow Street, and in the streets and coffee-houses of 18th century England and Ireland. His legacy proves a remarkable analogue to the state of post-revolutionary American theater, which sought to develop its own unique legacy but had, of necessity, to work with the English materials with which it was provided. In elaborating *TTBI*'s transatlantic performance history, we stand not only to enrich our understanding of the legacies of the play and its author, but also to rightly situate the performance of nationalism on the early American stage in a transatlantic context.

In his personal life and professional career, Charles Macklin performed an identity in flux, shifting and transforming as circumstances required. To some extent, it might be said that Macklin typifies a certain kind of late 18th century Irish identity, one that was compelled to appropriate and deploy Englishness in order to operate – politically, religiously, and economically – outside strictly Irish contexts. Macklin simply could not hope to attain success on the London stage without discarding – at least on the face of things – parts of his native Irish identity. Through *TTBI*, Macklin pushes back against Englishness from the vantage point of a refurbished Irishness, one that celebrates Irish antiquity, derogates English corruption, and, ultimately, captivated American audiences. Herein lies a crucial clue to the unique mobility of *TTBI* on the early American stage: equipped, like Macklin and his Irish countrymen, with wholly

English modes of theatrical performance, post-revolutionary audiences and playwrights would have to grapple for national identity from within the bounds of English cultural production. In examining the facts of Macklin's own life, we stand to better comprehend this complicated dynamic.

While much of the extant biographical information is of dubious authenticity, Macklin is widely believed to have been born Cathal MacLochlainn in 1690 in Culdaff, on the Inishowen peninsula in the far northern reaches of Ireland². His parents were Irish-speaking Catholics³, and his father was descended from the old Irish aristocracy⁴. Macklin's early years in Ireland were overshadowed by the Penal Laws, imposed by the British in order to suppress the native Catholic majority. In the words of J.O. Bartley, the Laws engendered an environment in which "it was with difficulty that any native and especially Catholic Irishman—except for a few privileged persons—who had ambitions outside commerce (or even within it) could achieve the smallest part of them without migration" (Bartley 3-4). Macklin was deprived the prospect of higher education, and took on work as badgeman at Trinity College before departing for England to build a career for himself⁵.

After spending time with a strolling acting troupe, Macklin settled in London in 1733, and set to work Anglicizing himself – his name, his accent⁶, the very manner in which he behaved⁷ – in order that he might succeed on the London stage. Macklin, we might say, was remarkably adept at performing whatever identity his surroundings and

² Bartley 6

³ Slowey 151

⁴ Bartley 6

⁵ Bartley 7

⁶ Bartley 7

⁷ *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800, Vol. 132* 155

career aspirations called for. Residents of eighteenth-century London were, in Richard Sennett's rendering, psychologically ensconced in the *theatrum mundi* tradition, which defined "public man as an actor" (Sennett 107); identity was recognized as a thing performed, and the stability of city social life was seen to depend in large part on the public audience's ability to recognize the signs of this performance. Macklin entered a city in flux, its streets filling with immigrants – "unknown quantities" (Sennett 52) – from the provinces, its social hierarchy less solid than before. Sennett invokes Erik Erikson to define identity as "the meeting point between who a person wants to be and what the world allows him to be" (Sennett 107); like the men and women who milled around him in the streets, taverns, coffee-houses, and theaters, Macklin performed identities, on and off the stage, in order to secure his place as a citizen and as a massively popular and influential performer⁸. The possibilities for Irish identity performance were circumscribed, to a great extent, by the preponderance of character types in the public imagination. These types served to announce national and ethnic background, not only on the stage proper but also in the *theatrum mundi*; as we shall see, in *The True-born Irishman*, Macklin, a keen performer of his own identity, subverted popular cultural forms by proposing a virtuous Irish type and elaborating a corrupted English one.

Rising quickly to prominence at Drury Lane, Macklin became widely known for promoting a "natural" style in performance (Bartley 11); critics at the time remarked upon "a new era in acting" (Hewitt 20), inaugurated by Macklin and David Garrick. Macklin was renowned for a "thorough and respectful treatment of roles," from his legendary and long-standing representation of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* to his renderings – "strong characterisations, much more than caricatures" – of Scottish

⁸ Wheatley 1997 112

personae, in *Macbeth* and, as Sir Archy and Sir Pertinax, in his own plays (Bartley 17-18). Bartley represents Macklin's acting legacy as one typified by "novel and idiosyncratic presentation" and the according of "a degree of individuality" to Jewish, Irish, and Scottish characters that were otherwise represented as uncomplicated stock types (Bartley 24). Barnard Hewitt has gone so far as to suggest that Macklin's innovative and wholly engaging portrayal of Shylock may have served to obscure the brogue that the actor was attempting to repress⁹. To be sure, the fact that Macklin imbued ethnic roles with such an original and stupefying degree of sincerity is compelling stuff, considering the subversion of stereotype effected by *TTBI*. After an early friendship with the venerable Garrick, Macklin fell out with the former after the actors' strike of 1743¹⁰. In 1744, Macklin wrote bitterly of this spat, describing the professional – and pecuniary – pressures his differences with the influential Garrick placed him under¹¹. In the early 1760s, Macklin returned to Ireland – where *The True-born Irishman* was, in short order, produced – and moved back and forth between the two countries in subsequent years, as requests for performances dictated.

Macklin was long into an exceptionally lengthy career before he began to explicitly treat Irish issues in his plays; Brian Friel, who penned an updated version of *The True-born Irishman* in the late twentieth century, regards the play as a sort of complex autobiography, as Macklin, at "ease and assurance in his new identity," sought "to write out of a discarded personality" (Friel 166). It would be foolish, however, to believe that Macklin cast his Irish identity aside entirely, picked up a full-cover English one, and only looked back from a remove; his career – and his identity – clearly spanned

⁹ Hewitt 21

¹⁰ Bartley 11

¹¹ Macklin 1774

both islands at once. In addition to earning a reputation as one of the great actors of the English stage, his countrymen had no shortage of opportunities to see him at home; between 1748 and 1800, he and his plays entertained audiences countless times, in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Belfast, Drogheda, Ennis, and Kilkenny. On these occasions, he seems to have presented himself – and, based on his reception, been perceived – as unequivocally Irish; before a hotly anticipated production of *TTBI* in Cork in 1762, Macklin “advertised that tickets...might be procured in advance from ‘the True-Born Irishman in George’s Street near the Theatre” (Clark 88). Bartley describes *The True-born Irishman* as an attempt to “reach beyond the ‘West British’ element in the Dublin audience to touch a deeper nationalist feeling,” to depict “a definitive and representative type of Irishman, presented without perversion or caricature, and appealing to Irishmen as such.” In this analysis, the play’s central character, O’Dogherty, should be seen as both descending from one of the families of “native Irish Catholic gentry” that turned “Protestant in self-preservation against the penal laws” and as a site of “self-identification” – indeed, a “mouthpiece” – for Macklin (Bartley 28). Donning different hats for different isles, Macklin performed distinct identities in Ireland and England in order to satisfy the expectations of the audiences that perceived him, inside the theater and out.

Critics have long illustrated – and been befuddled by – Macklin’s complex performances of identity. Desmond Slowey notes Macklin’s “Irish duality” (Slowey 151), one that blurs the border of ethnic identity and politics: “he may have stolen a Protestant landed-gentry persona, but he retained in [*TTBI*] and his other plays a native Irish outlook and pride in his origins” (Slowey 154). Slowey is not alone in

acknowledging this duality: Christopher Wheatley asserts that Macklin sympathized “with the [Anglo-Irish] patriots,” but, with mid-career success, became “almost ostentatiously unashamed of his Irish past.” Wheatley views Macklin’s politics as an “uneasy pairing” of “Irish pride” and support for “the calls for political reform common to sporadically anti-Catholic writers such as Lucas and Brooke.” Macklin’s support for the Anglo-Irish patriots – many of whom were virulently anti-Catholic – complicates our apprehension of *The True-born Irishman*’s apparent Irish nationalism and nativism¹². However, in Slowey’s reading, Murrough O’Dogherty, as true-born Irishman, is “the very opposite of a Patriot” in the Hibernian sense of the word (Slowey 157), and reflects instead “the Arthur Young/Maria Edgeworth school of economic patriotism; he echoes Swift on the patriotic excellence of making a blade of corn grow where none grew before” (Slowey 152). For Slowey, “O’Dogherty scathingly attacks the Protestant Interest through its vaunted and treasured Patriotism,” and identifies with “the economic basis of society and civilization,” preferring “the smooth operation of economics” to “all this talk of liberty and self-government” (Slowey 158). Perhaps most compellingly, Slowey identifies O’Dogherty as performing a complex Irish Gentleman character type: Macklin is seen as contributing to “an aggregate portrait of the Hibernian Gentleman,” defined as “a synthesis of the two tendencies, the responsible bourgeois and the creative anarchist, that formed the two sides of the Irish Gentleman as he appeared in the drama of the eighteenth century” (Slowey 242-43). This last characterization seems closest to the mark; as we’ll see, O’Dogherty is meant to transcend political faction and religious partisanship in order to consolidate a unified Irishness, a national identity that can be examined and contrasted with its English counterpart.

¹² Wheatley 1999 91-93

A thorough close reading of *The True-born Irishman* will not only do justice to the extent and complexity of its polemical project, but will illuminate the myriad ways in which its message must have resonated with American audiences. English colonial rule in Ireland is represented not only as politically and economically oppressive, but as corruptive, emasculating, and diseased. O'Dogherty imagines an alternative mode of management, one extricated from extant partisan politics and from the rotten, debt-laden, commodity-obsessed English economic system. In this way, Macklin subtly indicts England's imperial machinations. What is perhaps most original – and, no doubt, compelling for late-18th century audiences – about *TTBI*'s argument is that we are encouraged to perceive O'Dogherty not as a downtrodden victim of colonial oppression, but as virtuous Irish citizen assailed by the frivolity of an English nation that has become polluted by empire, materialism, and rather too much foreign food.

That *TTBI* found little favor in England is less than astounding. In his eloquent and influential *Theatrical Nation*, Michael Ragussis argues that the Georgian stage was “a site of ethnic conflict and ethnic reconciliation, making the theater the central cultural arena in which a battle over national identity was waged” (Ragussis 1). On the one hand, ethnic types – the “Irish horde”¹³ not least among them – were invoked in “an attempt to maintain them as purely theatrical, as a form of ethnic spectacle, used on the stage to locate and secure the boundary between Englishness and otherness” (Ragussis 2). The stage Irishman – often figured as “an irascible, prickly adventurer on the make” (O'Toole 102) – was a popular and instantly recognizable character type, interpellated, in Judith Butler's sense, into existence via stage representation¹⁴. Elsewhere in Ragussis's study,

¹³ Sennett 51

¹⁴ Butler 5

“minorities themselves made theater a site of resistance”; hence, “the theater became quite literally a site of contestation between and among different ethnic and national groups” (Ragussis 5-6). For Ragussis, these multiplicitous and conflicting potentialities typify the state of the English nation writ large, and expose to the light the “popular cultural fiction” (Ragussis 11) that viewed that nation as uncomplicatedly unified, and the theater as the instrument of national unification.

Ragussis treats *The True-born Irishman* carefully and extensively in *Theatrical Nation*; in the final analysis, he credits *TTBI* with demonstrating the manner in which “the trope of the failed ethnic imposter became a way of authenticating minority cultures.” In his deft account, the play indicts – and reforms – Mrs. Diggerty’s desire to ape Englishness en route to making a “spectacle of Englishness” (Ragussis 69; my emphasis) at play’s end. If, in Ragussis’s estimation, *TTBI* reorients a derisive theatrical gaze toward Englishness, Helen Burke describes the way in which the play recasts the “typical ‘reform of the rake’ theme” toward valorizing “good, plain, old Irish English” and “fine sounding Milesian” names. Macklin, Burke argues, works *through* English sentimental comedy to exploit it in the service of Irish nationalist ends (Burke 226). Similarly, Joep Leerssen demonstrates the way in which O’Dogherty’s views “are given the play’s full sympathy – or, in other words, they claim the audience’s full sympathy.” Working, in part, to rescue eighteenth-century Irish literature from the anterior of the literary canon, Leerssen identifies *TTBI* with a series of historical plays – including Howard’s *The Siege of Tamor* (1773) and Dobb’s *The Patriot King; or, Irish Chief* (1775) – which “begin to draw on Irish themes and characters in a way not approved by London standards” (Leerssen 252-54).

While Ragussis's is an eminently helpful reading, I tend to agree with Paul Goring's contention that the former's account of *TTBI* elides the very real limits of theatrical resistance on the London stage. In Goring's view, "the London theaters offered only the most circumscribed opportunities for ethnic resistance," and "ethnic resistance, when voiced, typically confronted an array of muffling mechanisms from the London theater's 'true-born' English Protestant majority, both in the audience and among theatrical workers" (Goring 62). If Goring overstates the case when he suggests that Ragussis's account threatens to "generate slanted narratives of antiimperialist wish fulfillment" (Goring 9) – Ragussis does, after all, acknowledge *TTBI*'s London failure – a thorough understanding of the play's cultural situation must take the Covent Garden disaster more fully into account.

November 28, 1767 marked *The Irish Fine Lady*'s catastrophic London debut. According to William Appleton, the play's "curious idiom, half-brogue and half-Cockney, puzzled the audience, as did its highly topical Irish allusions." In his curtain speech, Macklin rather groveled: "Ladies and Gentlemen, I am very sensible that there are several passages in this play which deserve to be reprobated and I assure you that they shall never offend your ears again." Later, he would muse: "I believe the audience are right. There's a geography in humor as well as in morals, which I had not previously considered" (Appleton 141-42). For Goring, this episode is emblematic of the Georgian stage's "immense capacity for counterresistance"(Goring 62): "The London theater afforded Macklin only limited opportunities for progressive 'national reflection'; thus the cultural work performed there by his plays needs to be seen not as part of the emancipatory trajectory proposed by Ragussis but, more bleakly, as part of an ongoing

struggle that, at the end of the century, had done little to advance the position of the Irish in London” (Goring 66). One thing at least is certain – *The Irish Fine Lady* was never again performed at Covent Garden.

Murrough O’Dogherty stands at once for the ancient Irish aristocracy and a particular elaboration of the Protestant Irish gentry of the 18th century. His O Dochartaigh ancestry places him in a lordly lineage that dates back to the fourteenth century, and serves as a point of connection with Macklin himself – the MacLochláinns were, historically, the O Dochartaighs’ tenants¹⁵. He keeps servants, is at least respectably wealthy, and repeatedly expresses his investment in the productive management of Irish land; when first we see O’Dogherty and his brother-in-law, Counsellor Hamilton, interact, the former describes his enthusiasm in terms of agriculture: “I give you my honour I am as glad to see you in Dublin at this juncture, as I should to see a hundred head of fat bullocks upon my own land, all ready for the Ballinasloe fair” (Macklin 84). So, too, in ironically describing the proliferation of the likes of the debauched Count Mushroom across the Irish countryside: “you will find a great many relations here, count; for we have a large crop of the Mushrooms in this here country” (Macklin 92). This is an early example of a trope of productive, healthful land management – contrasted with anglophile commodity culture – that O’Dogherty invokes repeatedly over the course of the text.

O’Dogherty rejects extant political faction and process entirely, and describes his ideal landowner: “an honest quiet country gentleman who out of policy and humanity establishes manufactories, or that contrives employment for the idle and the industrious, or that makes but a blade of corn grow where there was none before, is of more use to

¹⁵ Macklin 83 n.

this poor country than all the courtiers, and patriots, and politicians, and prodigals that are unhanged” (Macklin 87). Instead of aligning himself with the Court or Patriotic parties, O’Dogherty decries both as tending towards corruption: “for now I find that a courtier is just as honest a man as a patriot—my dear, they are both made of the same stuff; ah, I have at last found out what sort of an animal a patriot is” (Macklin 87). When Counsellor Hamilton urges him to throw his lot in with an upcoming Irish Parliament election, O’Dogherty recalls a previous political stint with disgust: “I would not consent to sit like an image, and when the master of the puppets pulled the string of my jaw on one side, to say aye, and on t’other side, to say no, and to leap over a stick backwards and forwards, just as the faction of party and jobbers, and leaders, and political adventurers directed” (Macklin 86). In these lines, O’Dogherty conceptualizes an alternative mode of Irish management, one that defies extant political systems and that urges a healthful engagement with the local. In a lengthy footnote, Bartley identifies the playwright in the part:

This and the immediately previous speeches seem to express Macklin’s own views. During the eighteenth century, the measures ruining Irish trade for England’s benefit, and the preferment of England, were supported in the Irish Parliament (in which no Catholic could sit) by the Court party, made up of Englishmen and their Irish jackals, which held the strings of corruption and so was normally sure of its majority. Some members, however, caring about Irish prosperity, constituted the Patriotic party and strove steadfastly against such evils: they had the powerful outside support of Swift’s pen. But not all patriots were honest: some were only concerned to make nuisances of themselves in order to be bought off with places, pensions, or titles. The dislike and distrust of politics and politicians which Macklin often voiced is evident here. To have been an M.P., and to evade the penal restrictions upon Catholic landholders, a forbear, or O’Dogherty himself, must have turned Protestant. (Macklin 87-88 n.)

Counsellor Hamilton remarks upon a kind of incommensurability between the values embodied by O'Dogherty's ancestral name and the current, corrupted political situation: "how in the name of wonder and common sense can politics and the name of Dogherty be connected?" (Macklin 86) Mrs. Diggerty's transgressions are figured, at a very early moment, in terms of a violation of this demarcation: "among the rest of your sister's whims and madresses," O'Dogherty explains to Hamilton, "she is turned a great politician too concerning my name" (Macklin 85). Mrs. Diggerty and Counsellor Hamilton have entered into the ranks of the old Irish aristocracy via marriage; as Bartley explains, the "father of Mrs. Diggerty and the Counsellor had married into the old Irish family of Ó Gallchobair, descended from a seventh-century king of Ireland, and like the Ó Dochartaighs and MacLochláinns, associated with Donegal" (Macklin 95 n.). Thus, when Mrs. Diggerty jettisons the name of O'Dogherty, she discards the ancestral aristocratic status her family has managed to attain for their line in Ireland. The material trappings of economic and social status for which Mrs. Diggerty yearns are set in stark contrast to O'Dogherty's conception of meaningful enrichment of the Irish nation. O'Dogherty regards his wife's desire for a title as part and parcel of the degradation of the Irish situation: "she would have me desert my friends," he explains, "and sell myself, my honour, and my country, as several others have done before me, merely for a title" (Macklin 86).

The iniquitous threat posed to Ireland by Mushroom and Mrs. Diggerty is repeatedly represented in terms of disease and contagion. Mrs. Diggerty has returned from the coronation "with a distemper that she has brought over with her from England, which will, in a little time...infect the whole nation" (Macklin 85). In reprimanding and

reforming his sister, Counsellor Hamilton aims to repair a malady that has spread from her person to the country: “’Tis what your insolent disease demands; the suddenness and abruptness of the shock is the chief ingredient in the remedy that must cure you” (Macklin 107). When O’Dogherty discloses his plot to expose – and make a humiliating spectacle of – Mushroom, he describes its potential to “not only expose him to the world, but cure him for ever” (Macklin 117). As Luke Gibbons explains, Ireland as blighted body was a prominent motif in the eighteenth century¹⁶. To make matters worse, representations of Ireland as diseased or injured generally served to portray the country as devoid of “dignity and...agency,” symbolically placing it alongside “the losers of history, and...those left behind by progress” (Gibbons 39). *TTBI*’s engagement with this trope is significant in the space it clears for *Irish* agency; the infiltration of English bodies and influence poses a threat that will only be purged by the machinations of the true-born Irishman O’Dogherty. Here and elsewhere, the play urges its audience to recognize the symbolic system Gibbons describes, but in reverse: England is rotten, and Ireland, if gravely threatened, can yet preserve its health.

By 1750, English and Anglo-Irish interests had successfully established a wide-ranging and widely-maligned feudal system of land ownership in Ireland. The Irish peasantry largely subsisted on land held by Anglo-Irish or absentee English landlords and managed by middlemen. The status quo rendered the meaningful accumulation of capital all but impossible for Irish people of the lower classes. As English landowners gradually came to acquire greater and greater swathes of Ireland, members of the Anglo-Irish gentry themselves became increasingly dissatisfied¹⁷. O’Dogherty is surely entangled in

¹⁶ Gibbons xii

¹⁷ Quinlan 248-54

this context, but Macklin would have us perceive his managerial potential in a profoundly different light. Here, as elsewhere, *The True-born Irishman* works *through* extant social, economic, and political structures in order to depict an alternative type of Irish gentry, one sincerely invested in sustainable development. Instead of existing *outside* of it, O'Dogherty represents a productive *engagement with and manipulation of* the status quo.

O'Dogherty serves as middleman between Lord Oldcastle (an absentee landlord) and the lord's Irish tenants. O'Dogherty can be seen to represent, to a significant extent, a sort of idealized form of this relationship; if O'Dogherty resents the arrangement, he nonetheless works through it in order to effect the enrichment of Ireland. He is open about his determined manipulation of his middleman status: he "is going to score off a scoundrel and an English absentee in possession of Irish land" (Macklin 89 n.). His legal management of Lord Oldcastle's holdings, threatened by Mushrooms meddling, "is only a good bargain got from a foolish lord by the ingenuity of a knavish agent, which is what happens every day in this country, and in every country indeed" (Macklin 89). From the ground level, O'Dogherty is able to deal – if somewhat dishonestly – with Oldcastle in a way that betters his and his countrymen's lot.

Mrs. Diggerty resents her husband for his relative lack of enthusiasm for acquiring a peerage: "I am affronted for want of a title," she explains: "a parcel of upstarts, with their crownets upon their coaches, their chairs, their spoons, their handkerchiefs—nay, on the very knockers of their doors—creatures that were below me but t'other day, are now truly my superiors, and have the precedency, and are set above me at table" (Macklin 100). She vituperates against what she perceives as the illegitimate ascendancy of certain members of the Irish classes to a position of respectability; this

seems, in part, to reflect widespread anxiety regarding the enrichment of certain members of the British dominions as a result of imperial commerce. Indeed, a very particular brand of subtle imperial critique pervades *The True-born Irishman*. Mushroom is a stand-in for the machinations of the English state on foreign soils; he is “at home” everywhere he goes, one of the “men of the world” (Macklin 91). He represents a corruption of the English social hierarchy, born as he was to “a pawn-broker in London” who endeavored to “make a gentleman of his son” at Oxford (Macklin 88). His illegitimacy is further stressed by the revelation that “Count” is a false title (Macklin 88), and Mushroom’s preposterously stilted English serves to emphasize the sense that he is not the genuine article (Macklin 90).

Throughout *TTBI*, language is of paramount importance for O’Dogherty; when Counsellor Hamilton harshly effects Mrs. Diggerty’s reformation, O’Dogherty declares, “I hope I shall never have any more of your London English[;] but let me have our own good, plain old Irish English, which I insist is better than all the English English that ever coquets and coxcombs brought into the land” (Macklin 111). Mushroom’s linguistic and symbolic economy – which is passed on in a still more degraded form to Mrs. Diggerty – is riddled by French vocabulary (Macklin 92) and, more compellingly still, by traces of empire. If Mrs. Diggerty is satirized for her use of French expressions – “I am convinced that the women of this here country who have never travelled, having nothing of that— a—a—non chalance, and that jenny-see-quee that we have in London” (Macklin 95) – Mushroom’s is an imperial symbolic sphere. At his exposure, he accuses Lady Bab of “continually feeding that nose of hers,” and of smelling “stronger of rappee than Lady Kinnegad does of the Spice Islands” (Macklin 114). In the moment of his supreme

embarrassment, Mushroom demonstrates his awareness of the British imperial economy and implicates Mrs. Diggerty's social circle in the commodity culture of the empire. Lady Bab indignantly responds, "I think a little rappee would not be amiss to clear your eyes, and refresh your spirits, and there is some for you" (Macklin 120) – before throwing snuff in Mushroom's face. Rappee, "a course snuff made from dark strong-smelling tobacco leaves" (OED), is literally projected into the face of the representative of empire, in order to complete his humiliation.

If America never receives explicit mention in *The True-born Irishman*, it – like the Spice Islands – is nonetheless implicated in the imperial imagination invoked by Mushroom and subtly critiqued by O'Dogherty. Besides providing a straightforward point of recognition, Mushroom's reference to rappee would have helped drive home Macklin's criticism of English economic policy for the American context. It would be possible to overstate the importance of tobacco – and plantation agriculture more generally – for English interests in the new world; by 1686, tobacco made up 76 percent of total import revenue from the American colonies. This spectacular success did not necessarily redound to the betterment of the tobacco-growers themselves; England protected its precious Atlantic tobacco trade via a series of draconic policies – such as the Navigation Acts – that insulated English merchants, stifled competition, and kept the planters from establishing meaningful business relationships of their own. As tobacco gained its enormous foothold in the English economy, it became more affordable, and thus infiltrated the lives of consumers across class lines¹⁸. In *TTBI*, tobacco becomes a particularly clever – and transatlantically mobile – symbol of imperial commodity culture's frightening potentialities – as threat to the prominence of local industry and

¹⁸ Menard 310-15

investment, and as enticement to the middle classes' burgeoning taste for frippery. Of course, we must see English finances during this period as ineluctably entangled with the economics of empire. "East India trade," Nicholas Dirks explains, "began with pepper, much of it from various Southeast Asian islands, and later diversified to include other spices such as cloves, nutmeg, mace, and cinnamon." The East India Company was not only "granted monopoly status and official sanction from the Crown" (Dirks 140), but also "grew in domestic importance as it became the chief financier for the public debt of the state through its bonds, and as Company directors gained increasing influence in Parliament" (Dirks 38). As we'll see, this relationship between imperialism and national indebtedness haunts O'Dogherty's critique of English policy and the malignant material culture that he diagnoses in Ireland.

A certain obsession with commodity culture is implicated, early on, in the deterioration of Ireland; O'Dogherty remarks that Irish women have become so obsessed with material possessions and with social climbing that their husbands have been ruined, and "in a very little time nothing will remain but a gaol, or an escape in the packet on Connought Monday" (Macklin 84). O'Dogherty thus gestures towards a most profound material loss – the departure of upstanding Irish men from the land. The literal reduction of Irishness via emigration was no fiction; according to some figures, the Cromwellian occupation that had so drastically shifted the balance of land ownership in Ireland had also resulted in the departure of one third of the country's Catholic population¹⁹. In *TTBI*, national emasculation is seen as stemming from the promiscuousness of corrupted Irish women; speaking of Mrs. Mulroony, O'Dogherty censures what he sees as a kind of epidemic frivolity: "it well becomes your father's daughter, and your husband's wife, to

¹⁹ Courbage 172

play at cards upon a Sunday. She is another of the fine ladies of this country, who, like my wife, is sending her soul to the devil, and her husband to a gaol as fast as she can” (Macklin 84). As John Sekora explains, luxury has regularly been implicated in the rise – or threat – of “barbarism” and “tyranny”: “When a people or its leaders felt themselves the victims of misfortune they regularly saw in luxury the enemy that caused it.” We might see O’Dogherty’s figure of the “honest quiet country gentleman” as an attempt to represent an alternative, genuine “means of satisfying human needs,” against an English mercantilist system coded as “luxurious, anathema” (Sekora 50-51). What’s more, Sekora evokes, via Bernard Mandeville, a popular notion of luxury as nationally corruptive – and nationally emasculating: “It is a receiv’d Notion, that luxury is as destructive to the wealth of the whole Body Politic, as it is to that of every individual Person who is guilty of it...And lastly, that it effeminates and enervates the People, by which the Nations become an easy Prey to the first Invaders” (Sekora 66-67). The perversion of responsible patriarchy that *TTBI* diagnoses is corrected, in large part, by the emasculation of Mushroom at play’s end. He is decked in women’s clothing at the time of his humiliation, and shudders at the threat of penetration posed by the manly O’Dogherty: “by all that’s honourable,” says the latter as he refers to Mushroom, “I would help the husband to put eight or ten inches of cold iron into the rascal’s bowels” (Macklin 116).

As to Irish women, Counsellor Hamilton describes their proper behavior in terms that run contrary to the obsession with fashionable material goods that is seen to typify the play’s female characters: “the anxiety and tears of repentance, though the rarest, are the brightest ornaments a modern fine lady can be decked in” (Macklin 110). As

economic commentator, O'Dogherty is less than sanguine about the effects of empire upon England, and not only links English indebtedness to commodity culture but prophesizes a similar fate for Ireland, should things run their present course: "my dear, they can afford to run mad after such nonsense; why, they owe more money than we are worth; stay till we are as rich as they are, and then we may be allowed to run mad after absurdities as well as they" (Macklin 101-102). Against this global, deteriorative economic system and all that it entails, O'Dogherty proposes a local emphasis. Out with English "macaronies" (Macklin 101), he declares, in urging that "good old Irish dishes be put in their places" (Macklin 111). This is represented as no simple culinary phobia, but a pressing social need; when Irish foods return to prominence, "the poor every day will have something to eat" (Macklin 111). Here, as elsewhere, the health of the Irish land and people is represented as contingent upon investment in things *Irish*, and a tossing aside of foreign intrusion of any and all kinds. *The True-born Irishman's* economic sensibilities find expression, too, in the play's figuration of cold hard cash. The prospect of Mrs. Diggerty borrowing money of Mushroom is to be avoided "upon any account," as though this sort of transaction will only further effect her corruption (Macklin 93). As Mrs. Diggerty's party begins, Mr. Fitzmungrel contributes a note to the gambling bank, thus implicating the role of money in the frivolous behavior of the corrupted Irish (Macklin 105). In the course of harshly reprimanding his sister for her bad behavior, Counsellor Hamilton extols the happy, crucial consequences of O'Dogherty's firm control of the family's purse-strings (Macklin 108).

There is a sense that the English have lost the job, that the Irish are headed down the same road, but that the latter may yet pull themselves back from the kind of

dissipation that has the English “always run[ning] mad about something or other, either about burlettas, pantomimes, a man in a bottle, a Cock-lane ghost, or something of equal importance” (Macklin 101). In *Edmund Burke and Ireland*, Gibbons describes Burke’s anxiety that England was doomed to “[perpetuate] the worst traits of the societies” it sought to civilize via colonialism (Gibbons 12); in *TTBI*, even Burke’s fear is turned on its head, as England is figured as ruined beyond repair, and O’Dogherty struggles to ensure the relative purity of Ireland. We might see Macklin’s project as more closely akin to Thomas Sheridan’s 1725 adaptation of Sophocles’s *Philoctetes*, which, in Gibbons’s account, demonstrates “that ‘savagery’, the existence of human beings in a primitive ‘state of nature’, is not always superseded by progress, but may in fact be produced by it” (Gibbons 68).

To put it broadly, *The True-born Irishman*’s condemnation of Englishness works so effectively because of its subtle, comprehensive reorientation of theatrical convention; O’Dogherty is sensible, masculine, and progressive, while Mushroom and England have regressed into empty-headed effeminacy. In the end, *TTBI* reads less like a plaintive lamentation of mistreatment at English hands than a carefully constructed exposition on the wisdom of self-governance. English colonial rule is not just unkind but unwholesome, not simply exploitative but horribly mismanaged. This is Englishness and Irishness through the true-born Irish lens, a top-to-bottom revision of mainstream representations. All this carried out by an Irishman who enjoyed spectacular success – and exerted enormous influence – on the London stage, for decades before and after *TTBI*.

Pre-revolutionary Philadelphian and New York audiences might well have been familiar with Macklin's oeuvre; *Love a la Mode* had enjoyed successful runs in both cities from 1768 onward²⁰. In 1784, William Spotswood of Philadelphia printed *The True-born Irishman; or the Irish Fine Lady. A Comedy in Two Acts. By Mr. Charles Macklin. Author of Love a-la-Mode, The True-Born Scotchman, &c.*²¹ Three years on, the play was printed again in Philadelphia, and was printed *and* performed – for the first time in the United States – in New York, at the John Street Theatre, on March 30, 1787. The entry in *American Bibliography* reporting the New York printing remarks that it followed the play's performance "at the theatre, New York, with universal applause" (Evans Volume 7). *TTBI* was produced at John Street a total of four times in 1787, once during each of the 1788 and 1789 seasons, and three times in 1794. '89 was a "banner year" for the New York theater, following as it did upon George Washington's inauguration; "the crowds in the city were great enough to warm the heart of the managers" (Odell 272), and, surely not coincidentally, *The True-born Irishman* was chosen to ring in the new season: it and George Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem* shared opening-night billing on April 14. Meanwhile, Philadelphian audiences had at least five opportunities to catch *TTBI* over the same stretch – two performances were put on there in 1788, one in 1789, and two again in 1790²². As Bruce McConachie has argued, the status of theater in the aftermath of the American Revolution was hotly contested, as the proponents of republicanism simultaneously "hoped for a theatre that would propagate republican values," yet "feared that playgoing would corrupt their own and others' civic virtue." *The True-born Irishman* hit the New York and Philadelphia stages at just this

²⁰ Johnson and Burling

²¹ Evans Volume 6

²² Odell 215, 222, 241, 245, 249, 266, 287, 319

enigmatic moment, before the American theatrical “revolution” of the 1790s (McConachie 126-27). Bearing these facts in mind, how can we begin to situate *TTBI* – and the virulent brand of Irish nationalism it declared – in the post-revolutionary theater of the United States? Why is it that *TTBI* enjoyed such success in this tetchy historical space, marked at once by persistent English “cultural hegemony” (Biggsby and Wilmeth 3) and a burgeoning taste for “aggressive patriotism” (McConachie 134)?

Macklin had realized that the most effective way to celebrate Irishness was within the dialectic of Irish-English relations; *TTBI* recuperates Irish national heritage through and against Mushroom, the representative of the upstart English gentry. In a sense, *TTBI* might be seen as emblematic of the fact that Macklin and his audiences were best able to valorize Irishness through and against the distinctly English-inflected cultural and theatrical forms available to them. At the same time, the play’s insistent disavowal of political factionalism succeeds, as Leerssen explains, in presenting the “struggle for liberty and independence” as nationally unifying: “a discursive, phraseological bond is...created by the pursuits of national liberty by the medieval Gaels and by the Enlightenment Anglo-Irish Patriots” (Leerssen 254). Unification was, undoubtedly, on the minds of the cultural practitioners of the post-revolutionary United States, and a survey of contemporary accounts of the nascent American theater exposes significant and fascinating congruities between it and its Irish counterpart. Both theatrical traditions were unique performative modes, as practitioners and audiences embraced, resisted, and reoriented circumscribed English theatrical modes.

Like its Irish counterpart, the nascent American theater relied heavily on English materials, from theatrical conventions to theater design to the very actors and actresses

that peopled its stages. If American identity was dramatically “contested and under construction” in the years following independence, the theater was a key site of contention and constitution (Reed 4). Jason Shaffer and Jeffrey Richards have demonstrated the paramount importance and popularity of theater and theatrical forms in late colonial, Revolutionary, and post-Revolutionary American contexts. Shaffer’s analysis of the period focuses, in part, on theatrical performances that occurred *outside* the walls of theaters proper – a “colonial performance culture” that began to redeploy “British culture for pro-American purposes” (Shaffer 7). These unofficial performances were brought on, in large part, by the Continental Congress’s 1778 ban on plays in patriot-controlled territory²³. The ban led, too, to an explosion in the popularity of *reading* plays, and, indeed, in the writing of plays that were intended for reading, not for performance; Richards explains, these works “were written not for the actual playhouse but...the stage of the world on which the real-life events referred to were being acted” (Richards xiii).

Following independence, efforts to use the reopened theaters to “demonstrate America’s cultural status to the watching nations of Europe, and establish...a ‘school of Republican virtue’ to disseminate political ideology to the theater-going public” (Nathans 5-6) were complicated by the fact that the new nation was characterized not by homogeneity but by diversity, of origin, class, religion, and political belief. These efforts were complicated further by the “continued dominance of British plays” (Shaffer 168) after the revolution. Nevertheless, republican nationalism was staged with zeal; in fashion compellingly congruent with *TTBI*’s project, republicanism’s performance stressed the central significance of patriarchy to its success: “the foil to the courageous,

²³ Richards xii

reliable, and virtuous male citizen,” Bruce McConachie explains, “was the timorous, unpredictable, and lustful woman” (McConachie 137). *TTBI*’s hard-nosed reformation of Mrs. Diggerty and pervasive emasculation-anxiety account, in part, for its efflorescence on American soil.

Before and after 1783, strident anti-theatrical movements were based not only on religious objections but also to a desire “to sever all political, financial, and cultural ties with Great Britain” (Nathans 6). In a simplified sense, the anti-theater activists were not altogether ill-informed in their fears: the “postwar theater managers did not rush out to demand new American works,” but rather “trotted out the old prewar favorites” (Richards xiv). Even those postwar theater owners and managers who loudly “expressed their disdain for the ‘corrupt’ British theater” are seen to have “hastened to ape British styles of architecture and design in their playhouses, importing scenery, curtains, even chandeliers from England” (Nathans 8). *TTBI* presented a practicable break from the standard English theatrical canon – its author was established and popular, its form recognizable; its ideology, on the other hand, was iconoclastic: anti-English, anti-colonial, and pro-independence. At a time when there simply was no mainstream American – let alone American nationalist – theatrical tradition, *TTBI* was a study in turning the theatrical forms and conventions of England against itself. In later years, a distinctly American theater scene would proliferate; in the meantime, *TTBI*’s offered a near approximation of the kind of polemical project desired by American theatergoers in the wake of the Revolutionary War.

Post-revolutionary mainstream American culture was marked by a complicated impulse to shed those vestiges of European influence it deemed corruptive, while

retaining certain aspects of the Old World's cultural legacy²⁴. A case in point is Royall Tyler's early American classic *The Contrast* (1787), which has been described as emblematic "of both the striking originality of the literature of the early republic and of its derivativeness" (Shaffer 169). *The Contrast* drew a great deal of inspiration from Sheridan, Addison, and Rowe, and yet its recognizably local – and vehemently patriotic – content leave no doubt as to its Americanness²⁵. Like Macklin before him, Tyler worked from within the English cultural and literary heritage, only to redeploy it in a manner that did justice to his national and ideological perspective. *TTBI* portrays English influence as economically and morally despoiling; the resonance of these themes, suggested by *TTBI*'s popularity in the United States, is confirmed by their appearance in homespun favorites like *The Contrast*.

Fascinatingly, the parallels between *The True-born Irishman* and *The Contrast* do not end there. *The Contrast* attempts to stage, through Manly, a kind of native Americanness, and pit it against "the effeminate beaux of New York society," Billy Dimple, Tyler's "Anglophile fop." *The Contrast*'s climactic attempted rape further invites comparison between its themes and those of Macklin's *TTBI*. Like O'Dogherty, Manly is "politically ambiguous," and his ideology was claimed by "both Federalists and Anti-Federalists in the audience" (Shaffer 173). Such evacuation of partisanship, effected so doggedly by *TTBI*, was of central importance to both plays' efforts to consolidate national identity in contradistinction to the English. None of this is to say that *TTBI* was a source for Tyler in any direct sense (still, might he not have picked up a copy of the 1784 Philadelphia printing, or seen or read the play when he arrived in New

²⁴ Richards xiv

²⁵ Shaffer 170

York in 1787?); however, these congruities are undeniable, and they attest to the crucial relevance of tropes of identifying *against* Englishness for late 18th century Irish and American nationalist playwriting. This Irish/American nationalist symmetry is strongly suggestive, too, of the mobility of Macklin's ideological project in the burgeoning but still relatively small and localized American theatrical scene. The anti-English mode would predominate in American theater well into the next century²⁶.

We might see *TTBI*'s American production history as entangled in some of the very conventions that it seeks to eschew. If O'Dogherty can be seen as a marked departure from the stereotyped stage Irishman, it is clear that New York audiences brought traditional expectations to bear upon staged ethnicity. An article in the *Daily Advertiser* of April 14, 1787 lauds John Henry's rendition of O'Dogherty in terms that might have proved as familiar in London as in New York: "Mr. Henry in the character of *Dougherty* exhibited merit, and always pleases where an *honest* Irishman is represented. His *chief* [*sic*] *d'oeuvre* in the *Irish line* is Beverly in the *Gamester*, and Sir Peter Teazle in the *School for Scandal*" (Odell 161). Intriguingly, Henry, extraordinarily well-regarded in the colonies, was performing Irishness on stage and off: born in Ireland, "he had been liberally educated, and made his *début* in London under the patronage of the elder Sheridan" (Odell 116). In 1785/86, Henry had become business partner to Lewis Hallam, Jr., whose family's American Company of Comedians (formerly London Company of Comedians) dominated American theater for the second half of the eighteenth century²⁷. When Hallam and Henry "pruned the role" of Bagatelle in John O'Keefe's *The Poor Soldier*, in order to avoid offending the United States's French allies, the *Daily*

²⁶ Brown 170

²⁷ Lee and Wilmeth 2

Advertiser recorded an unsavory public response: “‘A Constant Reader,’ on March 24th, deplores the fact that Hallam and Henry, in ‘their extreme desire to please,’ have altered and pared down the part of Bagatelle; the application of their policy would pare down Sir Archy MacSarcasm, the Irishman of the blunders, English villains, etc., for fear of offending Scotch, Irish, and English, respectively. What then becomes of the play?” (Odell 253) It is apparent that *TTBI* gained purchase on the American stage in a way that it, to put it very mildly, did not in England; nevertheless, it would be folly to suppose that the United States presented a performative context altogether free of stereotype and stock.

This essay represents the first attempt to explore the polyvalent significance of *The True-born Irishman*'s transatlantic production history. For that matter, there have, as yet, arisen no comprehensive accounts of the ways in which diverse nationalisms were staged in the United States in the early years of the republic. The historical and critical records must be cleared of these elisions if we are to arrive at a nuanced understanding of early American nationalism(s). From what we have here discussed, it is clear that Macklin's Irish nationalist play reverberated deeply with its American audiences; it is apparent, too, that its mode of defining national identity *against* Englishness was subsequently performed by American playwrights. The play's conflation of national integrity with staunch masculinity appealed to republican ideology; its economic sensibilities confirmed American antipathy for English mercantilist policy; perhaps most importantly, its derogation of Englishness lent Irishness – and, by extension, Americanness – a remarkable degree of agency and national righteousness. Irishness and Americanness are not, and were not, equivalent; still, the fruitful meeting of these

identities in late 18th century performative contexts demands that we consider the relationship between them, and points toward great strides that are yet to be made in engaging with transatlantic theatricality.

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