

# *Stayley's The Rival Theatres and Metatheatre*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *Theatre rivalry in Ireland in the 1700s has been described by stage historians such as William Clark, La Tourette Stockwell and, more recently, John Greene and Gladys Clark. A famous case involves the Smock Alley and Aungier Street companies, which ultimately were united in the 1743-44 season. Little is known, however, about the metatheatrical content of playtexts regarding rivalry in Dublin and London, such as The Rival Theatres (1759), by George Stayley, an actor and playwright who has been ignored by scholarship. This paper is about him, his context of production and his pretexts, which can only be studied in rare books and have been the subject of a postdoctoral project I developed as a Fellow at the Folger Shakespeare Library (Washington D.C./2001-02). Aspects that I have stressed include the role of audience preferences and of business constraints in the shaping of content and form, provided the tensions between high culture (notably Shakespearean) and the popular genres (the farce in particular) that gained space and visibility in the 1700s.*

Theatre rivalry in Ireland in the 1700s has been studied by stage historians such as William Clark, La Tourette Stockwell, John Greene and Gladys Clark. A famous case involves the Smock Alley and Aungier Streer companies, which ultimately were united in the 1743-44 season. Although rivalry continued to exist and was a subject matter of drama, little is known about the metatheatrical content of specific playtexts. Given the remarkable appeal of Shakespearean drama in the 1700s, in effect, authors of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and particularly those who have not been canonized in academic *curricula*, have received modest or no scholarly attention. Lewis Theobald's "Restored" pieces and then David Garrick's acting career are among the favorite topics in the bibliography that covers the period before the 1750s. Gray actually claims that "The story of criticism in the eighteenth century, it might in truth be said, centers in the developments in the judgments about Shakespeare" (19). As Dobson in particular has pointed out, the Bard has continuously been raised as far as one could be as a cultural symbol.

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This paper is meant to fill a bit of this gap by considering the work of George Stayley, an Englishman born “at Burton upon Trent, in Stratfordshire”<sup>2</sup> the author of *The Rival Theatres* (1759). This is a rare book that I have studied at the Folger Library and, in addition to illustrating the use of Shakespearean drama in the dramaturgy of the 1750s, reveals ways in which the theatrical space operates as a socio-political formation.

### Stayley’s *The Rival Theaters*: pretexts and transmission

The objective of my initial project was to study George Stayley’s play *The Rival Theatres: or, a play-house to be let* (1759, printed in Dublin and reprinted in London for W. Reeve), which I had located at the Folger Library vault. When I began reviewing bibliography, the matters of authorship and stage history became complicated because there was a connection between Stayley’s play and others with similar titles, and possibly by different authors, in two different houses, the Smock-Alley and Aungier Street theatres in Dublin. I had found a reference of an afterpiece named *The Rival Theatres*, performed on 10 Jan. 1737 at Aungier Street, Dublin, associated with another play called *The Stage Mutineers*. The entry bears:

Afterpiece: *The Rival Theatres; or, A Playhouse to be Lett.* [Probably *The Stage Mutineers; or, A Playhouse to be Lett.*] Cast: [listed in 24 Jan. 1737 Dublin edition] First Manager– Ward; Second Manager– Reed; Pistol– Butler; Crambo– Watson; Truncheon– J. Elrington; Comic– Jenkins; Wardrobe Keeper– Dash; Prompter– Seivers; Coupee– Sheridan; Madame Haughty– Mrs. Williamson; Mrs. Squeamish– Miss Mackay; Miss Crotchet– Miss Woffington; Miss Lovemode– Miss Butcher. Miscellaneous: A tragi-comi-farcical ballad opera. By “A Gentleman late of Trinity College, Cambridge, 1733” [i.e. Edward Phillips.] (Greene and Clark 198, boldface mine).

Greene and Clark, covering the Dublin stage from 1720 to 1745, do not mention George Stayley and list an Edward Phillips as the author of a play called *The Rival Theatres* recorded in the 1736-37 Aungier St. calendar (79). There were, in fact, I was three different playtexts, listed in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**

Dates	Title	Author	City/Theatre	Printer
1733	<i>The Stage Mutineers</i>	? Edward Phillips	London/Covent Garden	? For Richard Wellington
1737	<i>The Rival Theatres</i> (new ed. of SM?)	? Edward Phillips	Dublin/ Aungier Street	Ebenezer Rider for James Hamilton
1759	<i>The Rival Theatres</i> with the afterpiece <i>The Chocolate Makers</i>	George Stayley	London and Dublin/ ??	? For W. Reeve

Having examined the Folger Shakespeare Library copies of these rare books side-by-side, I verified that there are only two different plays, but one of them is a ballad-opera

that was published twice, under different titles, in England and later in Ireland: *The Stage-Mutineers: or, a play-house to be lett* (London, Printed for Richard Wellington, 1733) and *The Rival Theatres: or, a play-house to be lett* (Dublin, Printed by Ebenezer Rider for James Hamilton, 1737), with a different title-page lacking any indication of authorship, with changes in wording and a different cast list, similar to the one cited by Greene and Clark. My original object of study was the unique playtext of *The Rival Theatres: or, a play-house to be let* (MDCCLIX, printed in Dublin and reprinted in London for W. Reeve), by George Stayley.

Pursuing other editions, I found that Stayley's play had not only been printed in Dublin and reprinted in London for W. Reeve in 1759, as the title-page of the one copy I had looked at indicates, but it had also been printed in Dublin by D. Chamberlaine in 1759 and by Ebenezer Rider in 1742. The English Short Title Catalog (ESTC) lists a 1737 edition, also printed by Ebenezer Rider! The ESTC, however, provides different information, probably from the title pages of the 1742 and 1737 Rider printings: "A tragi-comi-farcical-ballad opera, as it is now acting at the Theatre-Royal in Aungier-Street". The ESTC is mistaken in listing a 1737 edition linked to Stayley. This book is not in the Folger Library, so that a question remained: had Ebenezer Rider printed a play with the same title for two different authors in 1737? This seemed unlikely. With the help of Bernadette Cunningham, Librarian of The Royal Irish Academy (RIA) I was able to identify a second mistake. The RIA item listed in the ESTC is not Stayley's. Rather, it is a copy of the Dublin issue of *The Stage Mutineers* with the 1737 title *The Rival Theatres*. It seems, therefore, that *The Rival Theatres* Greene and Clark have listed is in reality the *The Stage Mutineers*, which appeared in a non-dated second edition that can also be found in the Folger collection. Provided these doubts about authorship I have explored intertextual connections that I'll briefly mention, while discussing Stayley's play.

### **The content of *The Rival Theatres***

The Folger copy of Stayley's *The Rival Theatres* (PR/3699/S95/R6/Cage)<sup>3</sup> has irregular quire numbers and sequential page numbers from 2 through 30. Shakespearean plays are quoted frequently. According to the title-page, the piece is a farce. A "General Advertisement" (A2r) is found after the title page. It indicates that the author has released the texts for publication because of "The favourable reception [they] met in their Representation on the Stage [...]". A second title page mentions that the farce "was performed at the Theatre-Royal in Dublin" and collates as follows:

*The*  
*RIVAL THEATRES:*  
*OR,*  
*A PLAY-HOUSE TO BE LET.*  
*A*  
*FARCE.*

*As it was performed at the  
Theatre-Royal in Dublin.*

*Long hath the Stage, with partial Rigour, shewn  
Some Fools of all Professions– but her own;  
Long hath she laugh'd at Follies of the Age,  
Laugh you, in turn, at Follies of the Stage.  
Four borrow'd Lines a little alter'd.*

The phrase “*Four borrow'd Lines a little alter'd*,” has a source. I have identified similar lines in the Prologue of the various editions of *The Stage Mutineers*:

Long to your Sight the Stage has *partial* shown  
Some Fools of all Professions– *but their own*:  
Long has she laugh'd at *Follies* of the Age –  
Laugh, in your Turn, at *Follies* of the *Stage*.<sup>4</sup>

The verso of title page 2 bears an “Advertisement” per se, stressing that the objective of the Farce is “to turn into Ridicule the Falshoods [sic] and Inventions of Idleness and Party; [...]”. *The Rival Theatres* seems to be politically engaged in the cause of defending the Theatre-Royal. This Advertisement, like a pamphlet, praises the Theatre Royal: “Therefore, with the Voice of gratitude and Truth, be it often and loudly repeated, that the People of Ireland have not only expressed the warmest Attachments for the Theatre-Royal, but eagerly snatched at every Opportunity for Encouragement, and only want a Countenance to support it” (verso of title page 2).

A prologue follows. Its pretext is Jaques’s seven ages of men speech in *As You Like It*, but it stresses metatheatrical subject-matter: audiences, stage managers, apprentices and actors. The connections with Shakespeare and the capturing of polemics within a social context are explicit:

The World’s a Stage: So Shakespeare wisely said.  
(Look up and read it, written o’er my Head) [...]  
Herein, again, the Stage resembles States; [...]  
The World observes, and joins in our Debates.  
To such an height the Malady is grown,  
That Man and Wife \_\_ have Stages of their own.  
Their Pleasures, like their Creeds, lie different Ways,  
And go divided, now \_\_ to Church and Plays.

As the first scene unfolds, labor relations in the theatre are brought up, as Proteus, manager of a Play-House in New England, complains about the life of managers. Proteus

uses another Shakespearean allusion to remark how bad his night's sleep was: "Queen Mab was with me all Night (B1v)." He goes on to request that the Orderman take a letter to the printer. This is the piece's first obvious critique of the rival theater, concerning their excessive use of tragedy to attract the public and rhetorically praising both comedy and tragedy for the different ways each genre may be appreciated (B1v-B2). Proteus and the Orderman expand on the subject of profit and on how much money the rival house might have made the night before. Proteus then instructs Orderman to give what appear to be pamphlets to advertise that night's performance to well dress'd people: "See that the Women have Cardinals<sup>5</sup> [...] and the men clean Shirts; that they need not be oblig'd to wear Gloves, to hide their Dirt and spoil their Clapping (B3)." Proteus is eager to have audiences that can afford to pay well. He further instructs Orderman to find out what kind of program the public is looking forward to having in the other house, so that they may "either bring it out before them, or advertise something strong against it (B3)." Orderman agrees, remarking that "all Arts and Advantages are lawful in War Time (B3)."

The dialogue gradually develops the characterization of Proteus as a wicked, competitive manager who will do anything to hurt his business rivals, as he himself vows, quoting Shakespeare: "Damn me, but we'll crush 'em if we can: For, as Richard says, 'while they live, my goodly Kingdom's on a weak Foundation' (B3v)." There are no stage directions regarding acting, but he could be played as a very cunning person, indeed a Richard III of the theatre trade! The aggressive process of rivalry is also accentuated by Neutral, the character who tells an actress, Lady Betty Modish, that "both Houses will be shut up, by order of Government, till there's a Peace" (7). This Lady draws on Shakespearean subject matter and characters for her metaphors, asking Neutral: "[...] in these Theatrical Times, as we may call them, this bloody Contention between the Houses of York and Lancaster, which side have you declared for? Are you a Capulet or a Montague?" (7). Neutral simply says: "I am a Dutchman, and trade with both Nations" (8). Another intertextuality, this time with Norfolk's description of the poor condition of the enemy in *Richard II*, is found when Neutral refers to the Smock Alley artists as a "scum of Britons" (10). Explicit mention of rivalry between the houses is then made: "Lady: But seriously, Sir; which of the Houses do you really think will carry it next Winter?" (12). Neutral's guess "perhaps neither" proves to be correct when the joke of letting the Smock Alley is revealed in the Epilogue: "The Farce is done: my Staff of Office broke: A play-house to be let – was all a Joke" (29).

*The Rival Theatres* is followed by "The Chocolate-makers: Or, Mimickry Exposed. An Interlude. As it was performed at the Theatre-Royal in Dublin" [sic]. This afterpiece is 124 lines long (39-44) and seems to offer some insight regarding the playwright's craft in one of its footnotes: "A Mimick (according to Johnson's Dictionary): a ludicrous Imitator; a Buffoon, who ridicules by a Burlesque Imitation, copying another's Act or Manner so as to excite Laughter." (39) Whether or not Stayley viewed himself as a Mimic, the Piece also reflects upon the illusory and ephemeral nature of the artist's trade, a mere instrument in the business network:

For gen'ral Satire was the Stage design'd,  
 To shew the World, and moralize Mankind.  
 But when it comes to point at single Men,  
 'Tis Inhumanity, and Slander then.  
 Whether in Farces ye be turn'd to Scoff,  
 Or Fellow-Players *take each other off*. [...]  
 [...] 'Tis poor and cruel to expose Inferiors,  
 And worse than Folly to burlesque Superiors.  
 But how should common Merit 'scape th' Infection,  
 When Excellence itself is no Protection?  
 Have ye not seen, upon this very Spot, \_\_\_\_  
 (Alas! How soon is Woffington forgot?)  
 A woman fam'd for evry noble Gace,  
 Of Carriage, Action, Movement, Speech and Face;  
 Turn'd into Ridicule, and vile Description,  
 From Bits and Scraps of misapply'd Expression?

### **The playhouse and authorship issues**

What theatre was Stayley writing for (or about)? The expression “Theatre-Royal” on the 1759 title-page is ambiguous because both Smock-Alley and Aungier Streets (and later other houses) were *theatres royal*. Dublin’s first Theatre Royal was Smock Alley, opened in October 1662: “A replacement theatre in Aungier St. was nearing completion when, on 4 March 1734, ‘Part of the House’ at Smock Alley collapsed” (Greene and Clark 17), so that the company moved on to the new Theatre Royal in Aungier Street, opened on 9 March 1734. Meanwhile, manager Louis Duval took the initiative to build a new theatre on the site of the demolished Smock Alley: “the new Theatre Royal in Smock Alley was used for the first time on the evening of Thursday, 11 December 1735” (Greene and Clark 31). From then on, the two theatres became rivals:

[...] By the end of 1741-42 season the financial strain of six years of uninterrupted rivalry with Smock Alley was beginning to tell not only on the finances of the proprietors but also on the fabric of the building itself. [...] When the long-contemplated union of the Smock Alley and Aungier Street companies took place at the beginning of the 1743-44 season the United Company made its home at Aungier Street under the management of Thomas Griffith (Greene and Clark, 20-1) [and] the Smock Alley theatre was advertised for auction in January 1744 (Greene and Clark, 35).

The fact that George Stayley’s name appears on the title-page of the 1759 W. Reeve printing of *The Rival Theatres* is the major evidence of authorship, and Stockwell



also acknowledges him as the author of this 1759 edition (note 28, 342). By this time, then, the “Theatre Royal” on the title-page probably means neither Aungier Street nor Old Smock Alley, and Greene and Clark do not include Stayley as an actor of these companies in the 1740s. Nevertheless, the old music hall of Dublin opened as Crow-Street Theatre in 1758 and Stockwell does quote *The Rival Theatres* regarding the new rivalry Smock-Alley versus Crow-Street between 1758 and 1767, stating that “The intimate details of the situation which prevailed at Smock-alley during this season are also revealed in *The Rival Theatres* whose author, George Stayley, was at that time a member of the company” (Stockwell, 126-7), going on to quote a full page of conversation between the characters Proteus (manager) and Mr. Orderman (his servant), from p. 3 (Stockwell, 127-8; note 42, 343).

Additional scholarly information about Stayley is in a biography of Thomas Sheridan (Sheldon), who became the manager of the united Dublin theatres in 1745. Sheldon is interested in the later career, accounting for the exact beginning of Stayley’s new connection with Smock-Alley in 1752: “One other addition to the acting troupe must be specially mentioned: George Stayley, whose playing contributed little [...] but whose later writings touch often on Dublin theatrical matters. [...] he was made poet laureate of the company in 1753” (Sheldon 184). Regarding Stayley’s *The Rival Theatres* (1759) Sheldon does not mention previous versions or sources and claims that “it satirizes the destructive rivalry between Crow-Street and Smock-Alley” (184). Overall, the connection between Stayley, Phillips and the various books placed in Table 1 cannot be established on the basis of the bibliography consulted, but the on-going rivalry between the Dublin playhouses has been well documented by those who pursued the history of management.

A hypothesis could be that the Crow-Street Theatre opening in 1758 not only revived an old story of rivalry, but reminded Stayley of the 1733 play called *The Stage Mutineers*.

In his autobiography *The Life and Opinions of an Actor* (1762), Stayley claims to have been born “some little time before” George II was crowned (v. 1,5), which happened in 1727. Stayley also reports having arrived in Dublin on “the 29th day of May, 1752”, being hired immediately at Smock Alley and becoming the company’s Poet Laureat there in 1753 (v. 1, 22-4). He then acknowledges the authorship of *The Rival Theatres* before 1760, but provides no exact date (v. 1, 28). It is unlikely that he would remember a play he had seen in London when he was only six or seven years old, but he may have become acquainted with it in Dublin in his twenties. Interestingly, Edward Phillips, whether or not he was the author of *The Stage Mutineers*, was still in the scene in the 1750s, since his play *The Mock Lawyer* was in the Smock-Alley calendar in 1751-52 (Sheldon, 442).

The transmission of *The Stage Mutineers* in the Dublin 1737 edition printed by Ebenezer Rider happens with of a new title: *The Rival Theatre: or, a Play-House to be Lett*. It is also described as “A Tragi-Comi-Farcical-Ballad Opera,” and then linked with the Theatre-Royal in Aungier-Street. Stage directions assign the Prologue to Mr. J.

Elrington and the Epilogue to *Miss Woffington*. These Dublin players who are listed might have contributed in making the play known in Ireland, particularly Mr. Sheridan and Miss Woffington, who had London connections. Yet Margaret/Peg Woffington, who played her first part as Ophelia at Aungier Street in 1735, only began her acquaintance with manager John Rich of Covent Garden in 1740 (Hughes; Roose-Evans). Speculations apart, whatever prompted Ebenezer Rider to print *The Stage Mutineers* in Dublin with the new title *The Rival Theatres* for James Hamilton, this 1737 edition was completely reset and it also bears very different woodcuts and word changes, although the playtext is similar to that of previous editions.

## Afterthoughts

The historical processes of rivalry, of commercial struggle and of professional tensions that are appropriated in Stayley's *The Rival Theatres*, in addition to being coherent with non-fictional references of the period, reflect aspects of the theatre trade that are familiar and contemporary nowadays. The fiction deals with theatre dominantly as business at a time when aesthetic values and moral assumptions were changing rapidly and accommodating a range of cultural forms that the aristocracy and the Church could not control anymore. Playwrights as Stayley probably drew on prestigious authors in order to attract audiences and cater to the wishes of the eager managers who hired them. Provided this context, Stayley's *The Rival Theatres* indicates that the eighteenth century was not only about "restoring the classics" but also about dealing with business constraints and keeping playhouses open or closing them out, often at the expense of the workers, in this case a whole cast whose artistic value had little or no importance to the managers in their quest for profit and financial success. During my limited time at the Folger Library, I focused on bringing the metatheatrical relevance of Stayley's *The Rival Theatres* to light. All of the associated books in Table 1 are, however, rich primary sources for criticism, revealing tensions between high culture (including Shakespearean drama) and popular genres (especially the farce), as well as transformations in stage history and the entertainment business in the 1700s. Hopefully, the links I have opened here will allow for them to become objects of research for other scholars who pursue comparative theatre and drama studies.

## Notes

- 1 I am indebted to the Fellowship Committee of the Folger Shakespeare Library and to professors Geraldo U. de Sousa, Michael Dobson and Philip McGuire for recommending the project that led to this article.
- 2 An Internet search in Eureka Export/ ESTC (English Short Title Catalog) has yielded significant information about Stayley and his books, published between 1753 and 1780. Extant copies of his autobiography *Life and Opinions of an Actor* (Dublin 1762), which is the source here, exist in the United Kingdom. I read and have quoted from a microfilm of the Cambridge copy at the Penn



- State Univ. Pattee Library. An extensive bibliography by Stayley remains unexplored, despite indications that his works have been read internationally. The ESTC actually lists nineteen extant copies of *The Rival Theatres*, for example, some in the UK and others in university or research libraries of Canada and the United States.
- 3 All the quire numbers after the quotations of Stayley's *The Rival Theatres* are from this Folger copy.
  - 4 This quotation was taken from the Folger copy of *The Stage Mutineers* (1733).
  - 5 A Cardinal is "a short cloak worn by ladies, originally of scarlet cloth with a hood" (OED 891). Cardinals were fashionable in the 18th century and indicated a higher social status, as opposed to one piece Capuchins, worn by poorer women.

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