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THE POLITICS OF THE STAGE AND THE PAGE:
SOURCE PLAYS FOR GEORGE POWELL'S
A VERY GOOD WIFE (1693)
IN THEIR PRODUCTION AND PUBLICATION CONTEXTS

In this essay I shall be concerned with the sources for George Powell's first comedy, *A Very Good Wife*, produced by the United Company in the spring of 1693, and published shortly afterwards¹. What distinguishes this play from the host of other late seventeenth-century appropriations is the fact that it makes use of no less than four pre-Civil War comedies: Thomas Middleton's *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's*, Richard Brome's *The City Wit* and *The Court Beggar*, and James Shirley's *Hyde Park*².

The first point to be made about Powell's practice as adaptor in *A Very Good Wife* is that he does not acknowledge his sources. Neither the dedication nor the epilogue contains the slightest allusion to the work of the earlier dramatists to which the play stands so heavily indebted. Even the prologue written by William Congreve styles Powell as the undisputed author of the piece. The reasons for this 'omission' are not hard to find. First of all, Middleton, Brome,

¹ *The London Stage 1660-1800*, ed. van Lennep, William (Carbondale, Illinois, 1965), i, 420. For more information on Powell see J. Downes, *Roscius Anglicanus*, ed. J. Milhous and R.D. Hume (London, 1987), ft. 396, p. 109; S. Lee, *Dictionary of National Biography*, xvi, (London, 1909), pp. 241-242, *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*, xii, Highfill Jr, P.H., Burnim, K.A. & Langhans, E.A., (Carbondale, 1987), 107-112, L. Hook, *Restoration Theatre* (unpublished typescript), pp. 655-666. I am very grateful to Dr Hook for allowing me to quote from her work. Cf. also C. Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber*, ed. Fone, B.R.S., (Ann Arbor, 1968), pp. 106, 110, 113-115, 126, 131-134, 139-141, 143-144, 191-192, 311; *The Female Wits: or, The Triumvirate of Poets At Rehearsal. A Comedy* (1704), Augustan Reprint Society (1967); *A Comparison between the Two Stages* (London, 1702), p. 199; Ch. Gildon, *The Lives and Characters of the English Dramatic Poets* (London, 1699), p. 113.

² For a critical account of Powell's sources see Marston Stevens Balch, *Thomas Middleton's "No Wit, No Help like a Woman's" and "The Counterfeit Bridegroom" (1677) and Further Adaptations* (Salzburg, 1980), pp. 59-73.

and Shirley were relatively unknown to most theatre-goers of the nineties since hardly any of their plays were revived or reprinted at the time. Both *The City Wit* and *Hyde Park* were last produced in the 1660s and failed to attract much attention despite the rather extravagant expedient of bringing horses onto the stage in the case of the latter³. *The Court Beggar* had not been acted since its premiere in 1640, whereas *No Wit, No Help* could only be remembered in its 1677 revised version called *The Counterfeit Bridegroom*⁴. At the time of its Restoration revival in 1667 Pepys referred to *Hyde Park* as an "old play of Shirly's"⁵ - by the nineties these relics of the last age were not considered 'old' but downright ancient. It is not my intention to discuss the degree and nature of Powell's indebtedness to each of these plays, although the material certainly offers fascinating opportunities for investigation. Consider, for instance, a critical comparison of the use of discourse patterns (esp. the discourse of law and commerce), forms and strategies of address, representations of gender and social roles in the source plays and in Powell's adaptation. Instead of focusing on the 'verbal content' of Powell's sources, I would like to look at their respective historical, political, commercial and bibliographic contexts. In the course of my investigation I hope to highlight the early, mid-, and late seventeenth-century trajectories of textual transmission of plays, the patterns of dramatic publication, and their political and commercial implications.

There were no new editions of the four source plays available at the time *A Very Good Wife* was produced. The only extant copies dated back to the fifties in the case of Brome and Middleton, and the thirties in the case of Shirley. Consequently, Powell could have felt fairly confident that few of his audience would be in a position to perceive his manifold debt. What must also have contributed to his feeling of security was the theatrical monopoly enjoyed by the United Company, which meant in effect that there was no rival playhouse whose supporters might seize an opportunity to discredit the competition by pointing out the author's plagiarism.

A Very Good Wife appeared in a cheap quarto edition, then the customary format for publishing newly produced plays. Its title-page formula, "As it is Acted by their Majesties Servants at the Theatre-Royal", is indicative of the narrowing down of the gap between the

³. *London Stage*, i, 30; 139.

⁴. *London Stage*, i, 248.

⁵. *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. R. Latham, and W. Matthews, (London, 1983), ix, 260.

stage and the page. Towards the end of the seventeenth century play-quartos were increasingly seen as companion pieces to performance, and this mode of functioning was enhanced by a high percentage of revivals in the repertory of both companies (for which prior texts were accessible), as well as by the occasional sale of play-texts in advance of performance⁶.

If we now move back in time and investigate the contexts for production and publication of the comedies which furnished Powell with materials for his *Very Good Wife*, we notice significant differences in the patterns of textual transmission. Chronologically earliest of the source plays is Thomas Middleton's *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's* whose premiere has been conjectured to have taken place in 1611⁷. In the case of *No Wit, No Help* we are faced with a paucity of information about the Jacobean play's original appearance on stage and the lack of a published version close in time to theatrical production which is illustrative of the early seventeenth-century practice of NOT printing plays upon staging: the printing of the script, if it occurred at all, followed substantially later, and reflected the play's deletion from the repertory. Theatres protected their dramatic "properties" by not printing the newly premiered and successful plays so as to prevent the competition from staging them⁸. One could almost argue perversely that if a play was printed soon after staging, it must have been a total flop⁹.

No Wit, No Help was first published in octavo in 1657, that is to say more than forty years after it was written. We owe its preservation, along with scores of other pre-Civil War plays, to the puritan prohibition of theatrical activities in 1642, which dramatically curtailed playwriting, but simultaneously provided a boost to play reading, and hence to play publishing. The text of *No Wit, No Help* is indeterminate in the sense that it represents James Shirley's revision for a 1638 revival; and although the alterations may have been minor, we have no way of establishing their true extent.

⁶ See P. Holland, *The Ornament of Action: Text and Performance in Restoration Comedy* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 99-117.

⁷ Thomas Middleton, *No Wit, No Help like a Woman's*, ed. Johnson, E. Lowell (Lincoln, 1976), Introduction, pp. xi-xiii.

⁸ G. E. Bentley, *The Profession of Dramatist in Shakespeare's Time 1590-1642* (Princeton, 1971), pp. 264-292. Cf. J. Loewenstein, *The Script in the Marketplace, "Representations"* xii (1985), 101-114. For an account of the stationers' copyright in plays see L. Kirschbaum, *The Copyright of Elizabethan Plays*, The Library, fifth series, xiv (1959), 231-250.

⁹ Cf. S. Orgel, *The Authentic Shakespeare, "Representations"* xxi (1988), 6.

The staging of Shirley's *Hyde Park* in 1632 coincided with the Earl of Holland's opening of Hyde Park to the public, which accounts for the dedication prefixed to the 1637 edition of the play:

My Lord,

This Comedy in the title, is a part of your Lordships Command, which herefore grac'd, and made happy by your smile, when it was presented, after a long silence, upon first opening of the Parke, is come abroad to kisse your Lordships hand ... ¹⁰.

Here we perceive only a five-year gap between performance and publication, signalled in the title-page use of the past tense, "As it was presented by her Majesties Servants, at the private house in Drury Lane".

The published form of Shirley's play most fully corresponds to Powell's *A Very Good Wife* in the sense that both represent commercial quarto editions. Before the closing of the theatres, if a play was published on its own, it was most likely to appear as a quarto of not too high quality. There were some exceptions to this rule, such as, for example, John Suckling's *Aglaura*, brought out in folio in 1638, but even at that time they were seen as violations of an unwritten code of play publishing ¹¹.

Not only was it customary for play publication, when it took place, to significantly post-date the theatre production: some professional playwrights, notably Fletcher and Shakespeare, did not care to have their plays published. Others, however, seem to have considered it worth their while, and James Shirley was certainly one of them ¹². He brought out a considerable number of play-quartos before 1642, and it must have been on his initiative that the 1640 edition of *The Humorous Courtier* included "A Catalogue of such things as hath bene published by James Sherley Gent" ¹³. We shall encounter a similar catalogue appended to *The Cardinal* in the 1653 edition of Shirley's *Six New Playes* ¹⁴.

¹⁰. James Shirley, *Hyde Parke* (London, 1637), sig. A3^f.

¹¹. See, for instance, Richard Brome's poem entitled *Upon Aglaura* printed in folio which severely mocks Suckling's vanity in choosing the folio format for his play. The poem is reprinted in Brome's, *Five New Playes, Viz. The English Moor, or The Mock-Marriage. The Love-Sick Court, or The Ambitious Politique. Covent Garden Weeded. The New Academy, or The New Exchange. The Queen and Concubine* (London, 1659), following the title-page of *Covent Garden Weeded*, sig. A2^f.

¹². See Bentley, *Profession of Dramatist*, pp. 275-280; 268-271.

¹³. J. Shirley, *The Humorous Courtier* (London, 1640), sig. A2^f.

¹⁴. J. Shirley, *Six New Playes, Viz. Brothers. Sisters. Doubtful Heir. Imposture. Cardinal. Court Secret* (London, 1653), sig. F4^{r-v}.

As for the two comedies by Richard Brome pilfered by Powell in *A Very Good Wife*, they appeared in the 1653 *Five New Playes*, a year after the author's death, and years after their original staging. The situation with *The City Wit* is analogous to that of *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's* in that there is no critical consensus as to when it was first staged: the proposed dates range from 1629 to 1631¹⁵. *The Court Beggar*, on the other hand, is known to have been produced in 1640 by Beeston's Boys in quite turbulent circumstances: upon the staging of this and a number of other plays without a licence, the actors were imprisoned and their theatre temporarily closed down¹⁶.

Brome's publishing activities were severely constrained by his contract with Salisbury Court which explicitly denied him the right to sell his play-scripts to booksellers¹⁷. On the other hand, there is no evidence that Brome eagerly sought the company's consent to issue his plays. In that he is an example of a popular Caroline playwright for whom the playhouse rendering, not publication, appears to have been the preferred mode of communicating his work. Consequently, a lot of his plays were only printed posthumously, whereas others, which we know to have survived in manuscript at least until after the Restoration, have perished since¹⁸. Brome's dedication to one of the few plays published in his lifetime, *The Northern Lasse* (1632), clearly points to its diminished popularity three years after the premiere: "she [the Northern Lasse] prosperously liued, untill her late long Silence, and Discontinuance (to which she was compell'd) gaue her iustly to fear ... her owne decay"¹⁹. Now that he could no longer hope to have it acted, Brome resolved to publish *The Northern Lasse* in an attempt to secure patronage and so capitalise on the play's former success attested to by a line of commendatory verses prefixed to the edition, Ben Jonson's not least among them.

The affinity between the texts of Brome's *The City Wit* and *The Court Beggar* and Middleton's *No Wit, No Help* is a function of the cir-

¹⁵. 1629 is proposed as a conjectural date of the play's first production in C. E. Andrews, *Richard Brome: A Study of His Life and Works* (New York, 1913), p. 36; C. M. Shaw, *Richard Brome* (Boston, 1980), p. 13; M. Butler, *Theatre and Crisis 1632-1642* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 107. Alternative dating, c. 1630-31, is suggested in R.J. Kaufmann, *Richard Brome: Caroline Playwright* (New York and London, 1961), p. 39.

¹⁶. Butler, *Theatre and Crisis*, p. 136.

¹⁷. A. Haaker, *The Plague, the Theatre and the Poet*, "Renaissance Drama", n.s. (1968), 298.

¹⁸. A.B. Harbage, *Elizabethan-Restoration Palimpsest: "MLR"*, xxxv (1940), 291-293; Cf. also pp. 304-309.

¹⁹. R. Brome, *The Northern Lasse* (London, 1632), sig. A2^v.

cumstances of their publications: all three were printed during the Interregnum, they have the same publisher, Humphrey Moseley, and share the same octavo format; the only difference being that Brome's plays constituted a collection of five, while *No Wit* appeared on its own. However, even this disparity will be seen in a new light once we have observed that in 1657 *Two New Playes* of Middleton's were published in octavo by Humphrey Moseley. Consequently, though published on its own, *No Wit* could be, and was, conveniently bound with the octavo *Two New Playes*, which is confirmed in Charles Gildon's *Lives and Characters* (1699) "This [*No Wit*] and the other preceding Play [*More Dissemblers besides Women*], with *Women, beware Women*, may be had bound together, in a small 8vo or 12mo"²⁰. Before we proceed further with the examination of the 1650s publication context for plays by Brome and Middleton, it is crucial to extend our account to include Shirley as well, whose octavo volume *Six New Playes* was also brought out by Noseley in 1653²¹.

Richard Brome's *Five New Playes* (1653) were published posthumously - Brome died in 1652. In setting forth the volume, the publisher employed a staunch royalist poet, Alexander Brome (no blood relation of Richard's), who supplied the prefatory material and, most probably, some of the information on the title-pages of the respective plays. Alexander claims not to have altered any of Richard's lines and I think that we can trust his statement.

The third trajectory of transmission can be observed on the basis of James Shirley's *Six New Playes*, which differs from the Middleton and Brome collections in that the plays' author was alive at the time of publication and thus actively cooperated with the publisher on their issue. Not only was he responsible for the careful wording of the title-pages which clearly specify if, when, and where particular plays were staged. He also took advantage of the opportunity print offered him to seek patronage and protection from the supporters of the royalist cause. Consequently, he wrote separate dedications for each play, pointedly denouncing the regicides and highlighting the demise of letters they brought about. Needless to say, both the prefatory material to Richard Brome's collection as well as Shirley's dedications are heavily politicized and comprise unequivocally topical

²⁰. Gildon, *Lives*, p. 99. Note Gildon's uncertainty as to the actual format.

²¹. See my "Give me the sociable Pocket-books ...": *Humphrey Moseley's Serial Publication of Octavo Play Collections*" (*Publishing History*, forthcoming) for further discussion of these collections and a suggestion that Moseley was actually attempting to institute a series of octavo play-books throughout the 1650s.

references to the current situation of the state, and, to what most closely concerned the playwright – the suppression of play-acting by the puritan regime.

I would now like to focus on Richard Brome and explore the ways in which the appearance of his plays written between 1629 and 1640 in the bibliographical environment of the 1663 edition affected their meanings²². In order to do that, I shall examine two of the prefatory poems: *A Praeludium to Mr. Richard Brome's Playes* by Sir Aston Cokaine and Alexander Brome's *Upon the Ingenious Comedies of Mr. Richard Brome*. Cokaine's *Praeludium* laments the suppression of theatrical activity by the puritans and expresses eager anticipation of the theatre's return to the contemporary cultural landscape. At the same time, Cokaine points to the importance of availability and circulation of plays in published form:

Then we shall still have *Playes* and though we may
Not them in their full Glories yet display;
Yet we may please our selves by reading them,
Till a more Noble Act this Act condemne.
Happy will that day be, which will advance
This *Land* from durt of precise Ignorance ...
May this Time quickly come, those daies of Blisse
Drive Ignorance down to the dark Abisse²³.

It is immediately obvious that censorship of printed drama under the Commonwealth could not have been very strict if statements like this could be passed through the press²⁴.

Intense politicization of language parallel to that adopted by Aston Cokaine characterizes Alexander Brome's commendatory poem *Upon the Ingenious Comedies of Mr. Richard Brome*. Alexander opens the poem by deploring the present situation of the theatre as opposed to that before the War. The juxtaposition expresses in no uncertain terms his nostalgia for the past:

Time was, when *Learning*, *Poesie*, and *Wit*,
Were counted *Sacred* things, and hard to get.

²². The importance of bibliographical environments for the reception of texts has been discussed in J. McGann, *The Beauty of Inflections. Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford, 1988), see especially pp. 84-89. Cf. also the distinction between linguistic and bibliographical codes postulated by McGann in his *The Textual Condition* (Princeton, 1991).

²³. R. Brome, *Five New Playes*, (Viz.) *The Mad Couple well matcht. The Novella. The Court Begger. The City Witt. The Damoiselle* (London, 1653), sig. A2^f.

²⁴. Cf. L.B. Wright, *The Reading of Plays during the Puritan Revolution*, "HLB" vi (1934), 74-75. See also pp. 104-108.

Time was, when *Playes* were justly valu'd, when
Poets could laugh away the *Crimes* of men.
 And by Instructive *Recreations* teach
 More in one houre, then some in ten do preach.
 But *Times* are chang'd ... (sig. A3^v)

What appears puzzling, though, is Alexander Brome's confidence that the time of reckoning is nigh:

This *Revolution* makes exploded Wit
 Now see the fall of those that ruin'd it.
 And the Condemned *Stage* hath now obtain'd
 To see her *Executioners* Arraigned. (sig. A3^v)

and his more than cautious hope that things are really changing for the better, that those now in power might become the new "patrons" of poetry:

But now new *Stars* shine forth, and do pretend
 Wit shall be cherisht, and *Poets* finde a *Friend*. (sig. A4^f)

This sentiment is further articulated in the suggestive metaphor of the plays as "sleeping Poems now creep[ing] forth" (sig. A4^f). Alexander Brome concludes with a plea addressed to the present rulers for kindness, tolerance and patronage, and in the closing couplet introduces a curious equivalence between soldiers and poets,

May this *Work* prove successfull, and we finde
 Those men, that now are *Pow'r'rfull*, to be kinde!
 And give encouragement to *Wit*, and *Worth*.
 That things of *Weight* may come with boldnesse forth!
 Let *Souldiers* then protect, while *Poets* praise;
 Since that, which *Crownes* the Browes of Both, is *Baies*.
 (sig. A4r)

The ambiguity of Brome's political message implying that the architects of the new order are now the losers becomes more understandable when we specify the probable time of the poem's composition. As the title-page of *Five New Playes* informs us, the final stage of printing was completed and the book put on sale in 1653. A more precise dating is made possible by George Thomason's *Catalogue*, according to which the collection appeared on May 20²⁵, i.e. exactly a month after the Rump Parliament was expelled by

²⁵ *Catalogue of the Pamphlets, Books, Newspapers, and Manuscripts Relating to the Civil War, the Commonwealth, and Restoration*, Collected by George Thomason, 1640-1661 (London, 1908), ii, 16.

Cromwell, but before the calling of the Barebones Parliament. If we assume that Alexander Brome's poem was written during that month, his optimism can be seen against the background of the wider public relief at the demise of the Rump²⁶. This point is further strengthened by the examination of other publications that Thomason lists for May 20 - among them we find a supplication "To his Excellency Oliver Cromwell, Captain General, and to the Council of the Army. The humble Representation of severall Aldermen and other Citizens of London, etc., Praying for the summoning of a Parliament ..." and a pamphlet tellingly entitled: "The Army no Usurpers; shewing that the present Army is their late dissolving of the Parliament have done nothing contrary to Law"²⁷.

If we now turn to Richard Brome's plays, the texts of which follow Aston Cokaine's and Alexander Brome's political verses, we realize that the bibliographical environment endows the plays with meanings distinct from the ones they imparted to the original Caroline audiences. Both Alexander Brome and Aston Cokaine seem to enlist the comedies in the royalist cause and use them as a weapon against the hated puritan regime. In the process they envisage the pre-war years as a veritable golden age, and project Brome, alongside other Caroline literati, as a poet engaged exclusively in lashing the vices of the puritan brethren. This argument, however, is highly problematic since it totally ignores and erases that dimension of late Caroline drama which was strongly critical of Charles I and his Court, and of which Richard Brome was an important spokesman.

The third play of the 1653 volume, *The Court Beggar*, will serve to prove the point. Contrary to a more conservative view espoused by earlier critics of Brome's works, such as H.F. Allen, and K.M. Lynch²⁸, recent commentators, notably Martin Butler, underline Brome's negative stance not only toward individual Court figures but toward royal politics and the mechanics of Court preferment in general. Consequently, the significance of *The Court Beggar* goes beyond its satirical representation of William Dauenant as Courtwit, a Complementer, John Suckling as Ferdinand, and possibly Inigo Jones as Daynty, a Picturedrawer and a Pickpocket. Martin Butler describes *The Court Beggar* in its performance context as "a wholesale attack on the Scottish war and on the court itself", and further, as "a full-blooded

²⁶ See B. Worden, *The Rump Parliament 1648-1653* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 345-384.

²⁷ *Catalogue*, p. 16.

²⁸ H.F. Allen, *Comedies of Richard Brome*, pp. 25-26; K.M. Lynch, *The Social Mode of Restoration Comedy*, (New York, 1926), pp. 28-34.

and uncompromising demonstration of the bankruptcy of the personal rule and attack on all that the court, by 1640, had come to represent"²⁹. In light of the above it must seem ironical that the publication of Richard Brome's comedies, *The Court Beggar*, among them, should confer upon the plays the function of royalist propaganda. Of course, we may speculate as to how many of the original allusions would still have been recognizable to the 1650s reading public. However, one thing is certain - even if recognized, they would have been assessed by criteria diametrically opposed to those applied by the 1640 theatrical audience. Possibly even the play's author would not stand by all his implicit criticisms of the Court - after all it was Richard Brome who, in his commendatory verses for the 1647 Beaumont and Fletcher folio referred to "good King Charles", and anticipated "the Kings second coming to his Court"³⁰.

My aim in this paper has been to demonstrate how the historical and bibliographical contexts of publication subjected the semantics of pre-Civil war drama to a radical revision. Within the body of one book, i.e. the Brome collection, we encountered an amazing polyphony of voices generated by the interplay between the (contemporary) prefatory material and the dialogic of the five Brome plays, with their historically grounded prologues and epilogues. I have also attempted to stress the unique nature of play-publication between 1642 and 1660: since there was no possibility of staging in view, play-books served as a testimony of the now idealized past - thus subverting the original "message" of at least some plays-in-performance which had pursued a critique of the then extant structures of power³¹. Finally, we caught a glimpse of George Powell, a late seventeenth-century would-be playwright, concocting his first comedy from scraps of pre-Civil war plays which he removed from their original historical and bibliographical environments and conscripted in the service of the Post-Glorious Revolution exemplary comic ethos³².

²⁹ Butler, *Theatre and Crisis*, pp. 135-136; 220.

³⁰ F. Beaumont and J. Fletcher, *Comedies and Tragedies* (London, 1647), sig. g^l.

³¹ For further discussion of the political significance of play-reading and publishing in the Interregnum see Louis B., *The Reading of Plays during the Puritan Revolution*, "Huntington Library Bulletin" vi (1934), 73-108; L. Potter, *Secret Rites and Secret Writing. Royalist Literature, 1641-1660* (Cambridge, 1989).

³² Cf. R.D. Hume, *The Development of English Drama in Late Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 1976).

POSTSCRIPT

In 1692 George Powell together with another Drury Lane player, John Verbruggen, brought to the press and the stage *A New Opera; Called, Brutus of Alba: or, Augusta's Triumph*, which they presented as an "off-spring of a Nameless Parent"³³. They dedicated the opera to its publisher, Samuel Briscoe, in the process eulogizing him beyond measure. Briscoe also happened to have been the publisher of Powell's *A Very Good Wife* in 1693, and it is fair to say the author merited precisely such a publisher. Just as Powell shamelessly plundered the four "old" plays, so Briscoe, without a qualm, used the physical quarto of *A Very Good Wife* as a perfect site to derive additional profit. After the the word *Finis*, Briscoe appended the following Advertisement:

That Famous Powd'r, called Arcanum Magnum, formerly Prepared by the Learned Riverius, Physician Regent to the French King; and approved by most Persons of Quality in Christendom, for Preserving and Beautifying the Face, even to Old Age: It Cures Red Faces; Morphew; it prevents, and takes away Superfluous Hair growing on the Face ... It is prepared only by J. H. Doctor in Physick, in great Knight Rider-street near Doctors Commons Gate; a Blew Ball being over the Door where it may be had for 2s. 6d. the Paper with Directions for its Use³⁴.

Powell's and Verbruggen's dedicatory panegyric to the bookseller becomes even more amusing when we note that the catalogue of "Plays printed for S. Briscoe", included in *Brutus of Alba* lists Powell's *A Very Good Wife* "a Comedy, by an unknown Hand" (sig. 14^v)³⁵.

POLITYKA SCENY I STRONY: ŹRÓDŁA KOMEDII GEORGE'A POWELLA
WSPANIAŁA ŻONA (1693) W ICH KONTEKSTACH TEATRALNYCH I WYDAWNICZYCH

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł stanowi próbę uchwycenia historycznych uwarunkowań politycznej funkcji dramatu jako słowa mówionego oraz infleksji tejże funkcji na skutek druku w zmienionej sytuacji politycznej. Za punkt wyjścia do dyskusji posłużyła późno-sie-

³³ *A New Opera; Called, Brutus of Alba: or, Augusta's Triumph* (London, 1697), sig. A2^r.

³⁴ G. Powell, *A Very Good Wife* (London, 1693), p. 47.

³⁵ In another of Briscoe's catalogues, appended to Thomas Dogget's *The Country Wake* (London, 1696), *A Very Good Wife* is listed with no mention of the author altogether (sig. K4^r), even though other plays in the list appear with their author's names (sig. K4^{r-v}).

demnastowieczna komedia aktora i dramatopisarza brytyjskiego, George'a Powella, *Wspaniała żona* (*A Very Good Wife*) (1693), napisana i wystawiona wkrótce po Wspaniałej Rewolucji 1688/9 roku oraz przejęciu władzy przez Willhelma Orańskiego i Marię. Sztuka ta stanowi adaptację aż czterech wcześniejszych komedii: *Kobiecyci dowieść, kobieca pomoc* (*No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's*) Thomasa Middletona, *Miejski dowiec* (*The City Wit*) i *Dworski żebrak* (*The Court Begger*) Richarda Brome'a, oraz *Hyde Park* (*Hyde Park*) Jamesa Shirley'a, których premiery teatralne miały miejsce w pierwszej połowie siedemnastego wieku przed wybuchem Rewolucji Angielskiej i zamknięciem teatrów przez purytanów w roku 1642. Uważna analiza teatralnych (historycznych, politycznych) kontekstów, w jakich sztuki te były wystawiane, oraz porównanie tychże kontekstów z momentem pojawienia się wspaniałych komedii na rynku w formie książkowej, pozwala na wysunięcie hipotezy, iż druk w zmienionej sytuacji historycznej prowadzi do znaczących przekształceń pierwotnej (politycznej, ideologicznej) wymowy przedstawień teatralnych. Na przykładzie komedii Richarda Brome'a *Dworski żebrak* (*The Court Begger*) wykazano, iż sztuka zawierająca daleko idącą krytykę polityki dworskiej w okresie poprzedzającym wojnę domową, paradoksalnie zyskała funkcję propagandy rojalistycznej w wyniku publikacji w określonym momencie politycznym (po egzekucji Karola I i rozwiązaniu tzw. Barebones Parliament) i w specjalnym kontekście bibliograficznym (w zbiorze pięciu sztuk Brome'a, których teksty poprzedzone zostały serią politycznie aktualnych wierszy poetów-rojalistów opowiadających się za Restauracją monarchii).

Rozważania powyższe umieszczono w szerszym kontekście rynków teatralnego i wydawniczego oraz ich istotnego wpływu na formę przekazu literackiego, który w drugiej połowie siedemnastego wieku w coraz większym stopniu wiąże się ze zjawiskiem plagiatu dramatycznego (stąd wybór sztuk, które w późniejszym okresie zostają przetworzone na "nową" jakość teatralną i literacką).