Gender, Consumption, and Ideological Ambiguity in David Garrick’s Production of *The Orphan of China* (1759)

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In April 1759, Arthur Murphy’s *The Orphan of China* opened successfully at Drury Lane. Actor-manager David Garrick played the leading role of the Confucian patriot Zamti, with Mary Ann Yates as Mandane, his wife. Garrick was impressive as a national hero, but Mrs. Yates’s performance as a brave mother also attracted considerable attention. The play soon appeared in print, and in June 1759, a critic proclaimed that, “every one has, by this time, seen or read [the play], and most have applauded it.” Thanks in large part to Mrs. Yates’s stage presence and Chinoiserie costume, the production may have been more remarkable than the dramatic text. Set amidst an Oriental setting and garbed in a fashionable Oriental costume, the body of the English actress was integrated into an exotic spectacle—a stage spectacle that both contrasted and mirrored the social situation of English women.

Beginning from the assumption that there is a close relationship between women and consumption, this essay investigates how the first production of *The Orphan of China* represented a variant of English national identity shaped by cultural perceptions of gender, colonial expansion, and the Orient. My argument rests on a series of interdependent analogies: that the conflicts between Mandarins and Tartars in the play represent contemporaneous tensions between England and France; that Mandane, who opposes her husband’s absolutist patriotism and patriarchal authority, is the author’s spokesperson against Chinese and French anti-egalitarianism; and that the ideologically charged figure of Mrs. Yates may undercut Mandane’s potency as an authorial voice. English society tended to associate consumer culture with women, and, although female consumption surely contributed to the expansion of the British economy, it may also have weakened patriarchal control of women. Thus the female

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2 According to Liah Greenfeld, although national identity is different from “a unique identity [religious or linguistic, territorial or political], that is, a sense of Frenchness, Englishness, or Germanity,” this sense of uniqueness “may be articulated simultaneously with the emergence of the national identity, as happened in England”; see Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 12.
body of an actress wearing Chinoiserie costuming might undermine the credibility of the heroine’s political objectives. This article suggests how the first performance sought to avert ideological ambiguity by employing several dramatic and theatrical devices that would convey Mrs. Yates’s stage character to the audience. These devices include the epilogue’s identification of the actress with lady patrons; Yates’s reported skill in conveying character through majestic elocution and gestures; the prologue’s censure of Chinese patriotism; and the epilogue’s rejection of Chinese customs.

Furthermore, Murphy, who transformed French-inflected Chinese exoticism and absolutism into English aspirations for national liberty, also succeeded in rendering Mandane as a more sympathetic, self-determinate heroine. His departure from Voltaire’s pseudo-Confucian ideas about women can perhaps be ascribed to an emerging intellectual trend that connected better treatment of women with social progress. The presence of a defiant Oriental heroine in Murphy’s play echoes widespread debates about the role of women in an era when women’s status was beginning to change, and suggests that Murphy also was aware of the role played by women in the construction of English national identity. The play therefore shares in a larger patriotic endeavor during the Seven Years’ War (1756–63) to demonstrate English cultural superiority in relationship to France.

Murphy wrote *The Orphan of China* in November 1756, but continued to revise it for two more years. When Garrick initially refused to produce the play, Murphy induced Henry Fox and Horace Walpole to recommend it to him again. Garrick agreed to refer the play to an arbiter, William Whitehead (who succeeded Colley Cibber as Poet Laureate), for critical evaluation. Finally, Whitehead pronounced in favor of it. Several parts of Murphy’s tragedy were, however, produced collaboratively by the playwright, the manager, the actors, and their friends, for Murphy had to accommodate suggestions from Fox, Whitehead, and Garrick, and perhaps from George Colman and Horace Walpole as well. This was indeed a collaborative age when together, the audience and the makers of theatre articulated multiple layers of social meanings and political power through both stage design and dramatic enactment. This phenomenon of intertheatricality—“when a solitary or bipartite compositional process does not dominate”—thus expands the concepts of authorship in this period. For this reason, the prologue written by Whitehead and the epilogue, which was probably written by Garrick, along with the play proper and its theatrical performance and staging will be considered as an integrated entity on the night of the first performance.

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3 Murphy wrote to Garrick about his revision of the play in February 1759; see James Boaden, ed., *The Private Correspondence of David Garrick* (London: S. Bentley, 1831), 1: 98. For Murphy’s disputes with Garrick, see 1: 73, 81, 88, 89, 91–92, 96, 112; and Arthur Murphy, *The Life of David Garrick* (London: Wright, 1801), 1: 330–41.


6 M. E. Knapp, *Prologues and Epilogues of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961), 14. None of the printed editions of Murphy’s *Orphan of China* collected by the British Library identifies the author of the epilogue. I am inclined to agree with Knapp’s assertion that the epilogue was written by Garrick, especially because of its rhetorical tone and style.
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The Heroine and Nationalism

Murphy’s *The Orphan of China* is set during the thirteenth-century Mongol invasion of China by the Tartar emperor, Timurkan (Gengis Khan). The Chinese mandarin Zamti and his wife Mandane have rescued the orphaned Chinese prince, Zamphiri, from Timurkan, who eliminated the entire royal family. For twenty years, Zamti and Mandane have reared the prince and concealed his identity under the name of Etan. After substituting Hamet, their own infant son, for the royal orphan, they send Hamet away to Corea. The play begins, *in medias res*, with the capture of Hamet during a revolt against Timurkan, who mistakes Hamet for the prince and condemns him to death. Zamti will not endanger the prince to save his own birth son. He has been forming a conspiracy for a rebellion that will take place at midnight when the Tartars will be celebrating Hamet’s death. Mandane, who cannot bear to sacrifice her son for the national cause, has a heated argument with Zamti. She then openly declares Hamet as her son. Unable to identify his captive positively, Timurkan imprisons Zamti, Mandane, and Hamet. Mirvan, a Chinese in Timurkan’s confidence who secretly waits to avenge the deaths of his parents (slaughtered by Timurkan), tries to rescue Zamti’s family by dispatching Timurkan’s generals to suppress the rebellion. When Timurkan sends Hamet to be executed, Zamphiri enters to proclaim his identity and appeal to Timurkan for mercy, but Timurkan imprisons him before he can do so. Mandane begs Zamti to kill her with a dagger, but he cannot. While Zamti and Mandane are being tortured to make them reveal the orphan’s identity, Mirvan arranges a duel between Zamphiri and Timurkan, who is killed. Zamti remains on the rack and Mandane stabs herself. The Chinese conspirators are victorious, but Zamti does not survive to celebrate their victory. After a lengthy scene of lamentation for Mandane, Zamti dies and Zamphiri claims his throne.

In the final scene, while mourning Mandane’s death, the new king asks: “Are these our triumphs? / —these our promis’d joys?” (5.279–80). Thus the dénouement is anticlimactic, undercutting the heroic deeds that heroic plays purport to glorify. Echoing Mandane’s point of view, this finale suggests that patriotic triumph cannot compensate for family loss. Distressed by the sorrowful scene between the couple, the new King Zamphiri nearly loses his will to live: “Then take, ye pow’rs, then take your conquests back; / Zamphiri never can survive—” (5.299–300). Zamti, however, entreats the king to “live the father of a willing people” (5.311–22), perhaps hinting at constitutional monarchy. The king finally promises to live on for the sake of Zamti, Mandane, and the nation.

Reflecting the colonial rivalry between England and France, political allegory in *The Orphan of China* may have portended invasions of English colonies by the French. This tragedy was first performed in 1759—the *annus mirabilis* (“year of miracle”), when the British triumphed on all fronts in the Seven Years’ War with France. Anglo–French conflicts worldwide, especially in India, South America, and North America, indicate that Britain had become a global superpower during this period, for it was “the first time a genuine British Empire could be discerned.” London theatres took

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7 All quotations from *The Orphan of China* are taken from the first edition published by P. Vaillant in London in 1759. Subsequently, they will be cited parenthetically in the text.
up the cause of national patriotism in productions like Shakespeare’s *King Henry V*, which used politically charged advertising rhetoric: “With the glorious Victory of the English against the French at the Battle of Agincourt.” Yet, the invasion orchestrated by the French and the Jacobites engendered anxieties about English national character. Written at a time of English national crisis during the Seven Years’ War, the allegorical representation of national patriotism in *The Orphan of China* pays tribute to English constitutional monarchy more than it does to patriotic absolutism. Intriguingly, the play’s only female character, Mandane, is more firm in her rejection of absolutism than any of the other characters. In act 2, when Zamti reminds Mandane of her oaths to preserve their kings, she reveals her disbelief in their divinity:

> Our kings!—our kings!  
> What are the scepter’d rulers of the world?—  
> Form’d of one common clay, are they not all  
> Doom’d with each subject, with the meanest slave,  
> To drink the cup of human woe?—alike  
> All levell’d by affliction?—Sacred kings!  
> 'Tis human policy sets up their claim. (2.457–63)

For Mandane, kings are entirely human and therefore not superior to ordinary people. Her confrontation with Zamti reflects contemporary political tensions between England and France—two rival nations ruled by ideologically incompatible systems of constitutional monarchy and absolutist monarchy. Mandane’s rejection of royal divinity may allude to Whig scepticism about the divine right of kings. During the course of the play her role is transformed, as this formerly submissive wife rebels against the family patriarch. In act 2, when Mandane struggles between her affection for her own son and her husband’s decision to sacrifice their son for a patriotic cause, she challenges Zamti’s support for divine kingship directly. Relying on her authority as a mother, she declares that families take priority over kings: “Mine is a mother’s cause—mine is the cause / Of husband, wife, and child;—those tend’rest ties! / Superior to your right divine of kings!” (2.464–66).

By foregrounding Mandane’s defense of individual rights, the play criticizes the Chinese (and implicitly the French) patriotic enthusiasm for absolutist monarchy. Although Mandane is doubly dominated by her husband and the Tartar king, her self-assertion and capacity for reasoning about individual rights also challenge patriarchal absolutist ideology, which equates passivity with femaleness. By connecting Mandane to national affairs, Murphy takes his heroine out of the private sphere and into the public one. Her defiance not only subverts patriarchal hegemony, but also affects national politics. She enters the male-dominated political realm, acts as a speaking subject for her own actions, and challenges the patriarchal view of female self-effacement. Revolting against

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10 Mandane’s speech about kings also recalls George Savile’s comments on the death of Charles II: “the Defects laid to his Charge are such as may claim Indulgence from Mankind”; see Mark N. Brown, ed., *The Works of George Savile, Marquis of Halifax*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 2: 504.
the hegemony of Timurkan (the colonialist tyrant) and Zamti (the family patriarch), Mandane resists the socially prescribed absence of women from public affairs, thereby illuminating the idea that wives and mothers are also citizens of the nation. The play, then, may be understood to represent the family as an essential component of the nation, thus affirming the familial private space as no less important than the public sphere of national interest.

We may ask why Murphy would voice his social and political views through the persona of an estranged, disenfranchised female character who is “othered” by both sex and race and embodied onstage by an English actress in foreign dress. His apparent concern for equal treatment of alien minorities may offer a clue. An Irishman who received a Jesuit education in France and made his living in England, Murphy was often subjected to ridicule by political and theatrical rivals, who viewed him as an outsider and a social misfit. In several other writings, Murphy expressed his opinions of political and literary enemies through the mouths of foreign characters, including American Indians and Chinese philosophers. His *Alzuma*, for example, relates the story of a prince of the Incas, while his *Arminius* is the story of a first-century German. In the *Auditor*, Murphy, who speaks to a Creole in the voice of the Auditor, argued that ethnically alien people deserved equal respect so as “to make exceptions to no man, on account of the place of his nativity.”

Murphy used the foreigner as, in the words of Julia Kristeva, “the figure onto which the penetrating, ironical mind of the philosopher is delegated—his double, his mask.” He may also have used an alien voice to protect himself from malicious censure. Because of his earlier party affiliations, his plays were often subjected to ferocious criticism. Perhaps he used ambivalent alien figures or multiple characters to articulate his views because he hoped that such a strategy would prevent accusations of political partisanship. Murphy apparently succeeded, because nineteenth-century audiences generally responded positively to his Oriental heroine, and a contemporaneous list of female characters identified Mandane as one of the finest roles for an actress.

The Actress and Consumption

Although Mrs. Yates merely embodied Mandane onstage and spoke for another author in the epilogue, the actress’s impact on the audience was personal and direct. The multiple social meanings brought by the actress to the performance of the play may be understood in terms of *intertheatricality*: plays written and performed interdependently within a single theatrical tradition, as they are articulated in a theatrical code shared by writers, performers, and audiences. This code, of course, consists of language, dramatic genres, theatrical conventions, memories of previous plays and performances, and actors’ previous roles and their public personae on- and offstage.

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12 For instance, the *North Briton* (January 29, 1763) ridicules Murphy’s schooling at the Catholic St. Omer’s and his “alien” status as an Englishman.
As a consequence of Robert Walpole’s Licensing Act of 1737, London audiences had little choice but to attend the two Theatres Royal, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, and acting increasingly took predominance over text. Not surprisingly, during this period performers’ public and private lives were subject to increased scrutiny in various prints and paintings. For contemporary audiences, therefore, a performer’s offstage personality was often more interesting than the characters she or he played onstage. According to a contemporary pamphlet, The Actor, “[t]he person of a new performer is more talked of than his action; and if they are solicitous to see him out of the introductory Othello, it is not to examine what variety there is in his manner, but to see how he will look when the black is off his face.”

Mrs. Yates’s multiple identities—as a female Chinese dramatic character, as an English consumer of foreign dress, and, most importantly, as an English woman in a patriarchal society—exemplify the paradoxical significations of the disenfranchised female body. During this period, when a woman acted as a desiring subject (for example, as a consumer of imported luxuries), she became both a metonym for colonial prosperity and a warning against the commodity fetishism that signified the degeneration of English nationalism and subversion of patriarchy. Hence, by exhibiting her female body in the changing world of her audience—a world influenced more by mercantile capitalism than by feudalism—Mrs. Yates conveyed multiple ambivalent social meanings.

If, over the course of the eighteenth century, the English were unsure about the social and economic significance of consumption, they were even less certain about women’s role as consuming subjects. Mercantile capitalism encouraged English society to regard the display of imported goods as an important sign of position within the social hierarchy. Neil McKendrick, Roy Porter, and John Brewer, among many other scholars, have called this period “the birth of the consumer society.” According to them, England’s trading success increased class mobility, which in turn made “good taste” in consumer goods a crucial marker of social class. In this way, “good taste” (and, of course, wealth) began to displace hereditary privilege.

Murphy turned the Tartar invasion of China in The Orphan of China into an allegory of French cultural incursions into England, which succeeded largely because of the English aristocracy’s appetite for foreign goods. These incursions, however, threatened far-reaching consequences—among them, national corruption, conspicuous consumption, moral dissolution, and, most dangerously, the weakening of national character. Thus, although contemporary audiences were especially impressed by “the splendid assemblages of foreign dress” in The Orphan of China, the epilogue, spoken by Mrs. Yates, apologizes for the play’s use of fashionable Chinoiserie costume: “Ladies, excuse my dress—’tis true Chinese” (5). This apology may allude to certain social and economic shifts during the eighteenth century, a period when acts of consumption were increasingly being gendered “female.” Of course, after the Restoration, Charles II’s courtiers adored French finery (for which the English court was often criticized), but

by the eighteenth century, upper-class Englishmen had begun to dress more modestly. Women, on the other hand, were regarded as both “the fair sex” and the guardians of consumption. In this period, much more than men, women were associated with fashion—for which they were sometimes admired, since women’s imported clothing displayed the bounty of the colonial enterprise, and sometimes condemned, because greedy female shoppers were often disruptive. No wonder, then, that eighteenth-century English society was ambivalent about women’s consumption; some believed that consumerism increased national resources, while others argued that it exhausted the nation’s assets. Paradoxically, English society projected both desire for profit and apprehension about the corrupting effects of luxury onto the female consumer; thus women were both dominated and empowered by acts of consumption.

Mrs. Yates’s performance of an Oriental character wearing Chinoiserie costume evokes a paradoxical construction of femininity in relation to the discourses of consumerism, and this construction was clearly affected by contemporary definitions of women and men. Whereas the sensuous body was associated with women, the soul—or reason—was identified with men. Women were therefore viewed as more eager to engage in the physical pleasure of consumption and to crave all sorts of commodities. Since few women in this period had independent incomes, their ability to spend relied on their husbands’ or fathers’ income or assets. Although women may have sought to exhibit their families’ taste and wealth through acts of consumption, many men viewed these acts as wasteful and the female body as a subversive force frustrating the patriarchal body politic.

Of course, the idea that the female body is inherently corruptive is as old as the story told in Genesis. In this period, however, women’s supposed moral weaknesses, their tendency toward wasteful extravagance, and their lack of rational intellect allied them even to racial “others” such as barbarians and colonial natives. William Hogarth, the English painter whose *A Harlot’s Progress* (1731), *A Rake’s Progress* (1735), and *Marriage à-la-mode* (1743–45) satirize the vices of high and low life in eighteenth-century England, also reflected on the relationship between woman and consumption: many of his prints and paintings suggest that he regarded women as potential threats to society if they were not adequately contained. Reformers of manners and morals, such as Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, attacked women of fashion and recommended “a general Simplicity in our Dress, our Discourse, and our Behaviour.” Mrs. Yates’s role as a fashionable woman dressed in Chinoiserie costume may have echoed contemporary discourse about women as dupes of fashion who were devoid of pride in English national cultural identity.

26 Richard Steele, “Dedication,” *The Tatler* 47.
Dramatic and theatrical conflict in *The Orphan of China* must be viewed in the context of colonial empire and consumer society, when exploitation of the earth’s natural resources seemed morally and socially justifiable. In *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), for example, Bernard Mandeville, who regarded women’s consumption as the baneful though necessary consequence of England’s new wealth, wrote: “A considerable Portion of what the Prosperity of London and Trade in general, and consequently the Honour, Strength, Safety, and all the Worldly Interest of the Nation, consist in, depends entirely on the Deceit and vile Stratagems of Women.” Similarly, Daniel Defoe and Richard Blackmore offered a “providential and rationalistic” mercantile schema to ladies of fashion. In *The Spectator*, Addison, who concocted an imperial taxonomy of fashion for ladies of rank, represented their dress as evidence of the magnificence of English global trade, thereby linking the body of the lady of quality to luxurious objects that indicated class status.

In point of fact, many articles in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* addressed the effects of commercial imperialism on domestic life in England: some celebrated colonial trade, while others condemned it. Although Addison praised trade (“trade, without enlarging the British territories, has given us a kind of additional Empire”), he nevertheless criticized private vices such as greed and luxury that colonial commerce fostered. The figure of the woman was often fetishized, but the growth of female consumption was also linked to corruption and concerns about a weakening of national cultural character and identity. Women’s alleged preoccupation with fashionable attire and ornaments and their dangerous desire to consume the exotic suggest “the very otherness at the heart of the female consumer.” These polarized views point to a central paradox in the female appetite for goods: that though this appetite contributed to the expansion of the British economy, some viewed it as a threat to the patriarchal control of women.

In the first production of *The Orphan of China*, Mrs. Yates’s Chinoiserie costume may have attracted more attention than the other actors in the cast did. Of course, she was the only female performer in the play, but the reasons for the attention shown her were more complex. Women’s direct control over the market economy grew exponentially during this period. Mrs. Yates, an English woman wearing foreign costumes that evoked British imperial trade, represents two figures of femininity associated with contemporary social concerns: the elegant lady of quality as a mercantile consumer, and the frantic woman as a waster of colonial commerce. On the one hand, Mrs. Yates performed an image of femininity that supported overseas trade, thereby helping to

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31 Ibid., no. 69:1: 206; nos. 11, 55, 82, 114.
create greater desire for exotic consumer goods. Her Chinoiserie costume’s voluminous petticoat may even be seen to offer a symbolic link between female dress and the glories of the British trading empire. Thanks to its ostentatious visibility, architectural complexity, and splendid display of a plethora of materials gathered from around the globe, the petticoat functions as a sign of mercantile capitalism, framing the commodified female body as a sign of England’s mercantile prosperity. And on the other hand, Mrs. Yates’s Chinoiserie costume may also signify the moral degeneration caused by the importation of alien goods and culture. After England’s flourishing imperial trade brought an influx of foreign commodities into the country, its economy increasingly relied on expanding consumption of what would earlier have been regarded as wasteful “luxury goods” imported from all over the world, including China.

More than any other imported fashion, French Chinoiserie linked Mrs. Yates’s foreign costume to the detrimental effects of foreign trade on the domestic economy. By the time Murphy wrote his tragedy, English critics had targeted the vogue for French Chinoiserie as a sign of consumer excess. The World vehemently attacked Chinoiserie dresses for “their red, their pompons, their scraps of dirty gauze, flimsy satins, and black calicoes.” The English aristocracy, whose members were hungry for French imported luxury goods, manners, and language, initiated the trend. Since the late seventeenth century, once a month—even during wars—life-sized dolls were sent over from Paris so that English ladies might study the latest French fashions. During the first half of the eighteenth century, these ladies were anxious to be dressed à la mode and obsessed with Parisian clothing—so much so that contemporary English writers complained of the ruinous effects of French Chinoiserie on English national character. Addision and others like him worried that the female appetite for fashion would end the restriction on French goods; for this reason, he proposed “an Act of Parliament for Prohibiting the Importation of French Fopperies.” In The Expedition of Humphry Clinker, Tobias Smollett asserted that the English aristocracy was responsible for infecting English morals with French frivolity, and John Brown argued that luxury, one of the chief preoccupations of the ruling classes, had compromised the nation’s naval and military readiness and performance.

Averting Ideological Ambiguity

Although negative associations between the actress and consumption may have diminished the heroine’s authority as a critic of Chinese and French anti-egalitarianism, the first performance may have averted this ambiguity by employing several theatrical

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37 The World, no. 183 (May 1753).
39 See Linda Colley, Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837 (London, 1992), 88; and Gerald Newman, The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History, 1740–1830 (New York: St. Martins Press, 1997), 67–73. As late as the early twentieth century, Allardyce Nicoll refers to the second peak of the vogue for Chinoiserie during the mid-eighteenth century as an ailment: “From about this time, for what reason it is difficult to tell, there seems to have been a little recrudescence of interest in Asiatic themes”; see A History of English Drama 1660-1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), 2: 110.
40 The Spectator, no. 45.
and dramatic devices to convey Mrs. Yates’s stage character to the audience. These devices include the epilogue’s identification of the actress with stylish, upper-class women in the audience; Yates’s reported skill in conveying character through majestic elocution and gestures; the prologue’s censure of Chinese patriotism; and the epilogue’s rejection of Chinese customs.

As women in a public profession, actresses had long been disparaged for their supposed transgression against social conventions that located women in the private sphere and men in the public. But because actresses appropriated the image of a lady of quality and performed it in their private lives, they were able to present more convincing images of such ladies onstage. When Mrs. Yates played the role of Mandane—a virtuous heroine—she adorned herself, as did her female patrons, with similar ornament. This would have enhanced her verisimilitude when she performed the heroine’s superior inner life. In order to clarify Mrs. Yates’s ambiguous status, the epilogue endeavored to establish a relationship between the actress and the ladies of quality in her audience. In eighteenth-century prologues and epilogues, the player usually functions either as a mediator between the audience and the playwright, or as a servant to the audience (rather than the playwright). Thus, the player may comment on the playwright, or may plead with the audience on behalf of the playwright. The audience was conscious of the personality of the player behind the stage spectacle of the character. When the actress abandoned her role and addressed the audience as herself in a prologue or epilogue, a personal link between her and the audience was forged and hence “increased audience awareness of the real woman behind the actress’s role”—that is, the scandal or glamour of the actress in “real” life.

Accordingly, the epilogue to *Orphan of China* identifies Mrs. Yates with the female patrons in her audience by having her solicit them directly: “Ladies, . . . / Let *us* enjoy our dear small talk again” (5–7, emphasis added). She repeatedly uses words such as “we,” “our,” and “us” in order to insinuate herself into the group of upscale women who attended the theatre. It is for them that Mrs. Yates complains of the absence of romantic scenes that would appeal to the ladies:

So many heroes,—and not one in love!  
No suitor here to talk of flames that thrill;  
To say the civil thing—“Your eyes so kill!”—  
No ravisher, to force *us*—to *our* will! (9–12; emphasis added)

The end of the epilogue reminds the audience again that Mrs. Yates and the ladies in the audience share certain cultural characteristics; for example, while Chinese wives write letters from the top to the bottom of the page, English wives write letters from left to right:

Then how d’ye think they write?—You’ll ne’er divine—  
From top to bottom down in one strait line.  
*(Mimicks.)*  
We ladies, when *our* flames we cannot smother,  
Write letters—from one corner to another.  
*(Mimicks.)* (28–31, emphasis added)

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Finally, speaking on behalf of the playwright, Mrs. Yates emphasizes his special attention to the women in the audience and pleads for their favor:

But bless my wits! I’ve quite forgot the bard——
A civil soul!—By me he sends this card——
“Presents respects—to ev’ry lady here——
Hopes for the honor—of a single tear.” (35–38, emphasis added)

The epilogue’s specific concern with female spectators may reflect their numerical superiority in the audience and attendant power to determine the success of a production. Further confirmation may be found in contemporary attacks on aristocratic women who patronized the theatre, and constant appeals in prologues and epilogues to “the ladies” for their approval.44 Actresses like Mrs. Yates endeavored to associate themselves with women of rank, not only through direct appeals from the stage, but also by dressing in the most elegant contemporary fashions. By the end of the century, successful, fashionably dressed actresses not only began to set fashion, but also became objects of emulation for aristocratic women.45 Indeed, after the first performance of The Orphan of China, Mrs. Yates’s Chinoiserie costume attracted many female spectators’ attention and seemed destined to start a new fashion trend. According to a contemporary critic, “Mrs. Yates’s [dress] will, we imagine, make great improvements in the lady’s dress for the year 1759; as the greatest part of the female audience seemed to envy her successful appearance, and entirely attribute it to her ornamental habit.”46 Perhaps by linking Mrs. Yates’s female body to the bodies of the ladies of quality, the epilogue intends to elevate the status of both the actress and her role.

Mrs. Yates’s majestic physical enactment may also have helped to clarify the actress’s ambivalent status as a lady of quality, and invested her interpretation of Mandane with the strength and loftiness of an admirable heroine who courageously struggles against the social conventions of patriarchal absolutism. After the first performance, Mrs. Yates’s talents were widely acknowledged, and in the years between the death of Susannah Cibber and the rise of Sarah Siddons, she was considered to be one of England’s greatest actresses. Able to express the deepest pathos by means of grand elocution and gesture, Mrs. Yates’s style was much closer to the majesty of Siddons than to the tenderness of Cibber. Although an actress’s power tends to lie in her physical stage presence, reviews, biographies, and paintings reveal something of her physical performance and, therefore, something of the construction of femininity during the period. There is surprising unanimity among contemporary commentary on Mrs. Yates’s acting style. Fanny Burney wrote that “the expression of her [Mrs. Yates’s] face is infinitely haughty and hard.”47 Hugh Kelly praised her stateliness and clear voice, while reproaching “her sense too vehemently strong” and seeming inability to temper “pride” with “tenderness.”48 Similarly, the Rational Rosciad suggested that Mrs. Yates’s unbending haughtiness and lack of sympathy or tenderness reflected a tendency to play too strongly.49 Thomas Davies commended Mrs. Yates’s “just elocu-

48 Hugh Kelly, Thespis, 2nd ed. (London: G. Kearsly, 1766), 40–44.
tion, noble manner, warm passion, and majestic deportment.”

William Hawkins noted her talent for the “haughty and passionate parts of tragedy,” but also her lack of “tender passions, stifled pangs, or soft feelings.” According to John Taylor, “Mrs. Yates appeared to me to be most commanding and dignified woman I had ever seen. . . . I do not think she was qualified either for parts of tenderness, or for comedy.”

In sum, Mrs. Yates’s haughtiness and loftiness were effective for tragic characters, but, in an age when Garrick’s “natural acting” had begun to take precedence over the more formal declamatory style of Thomas Betterton and James Quin, contemporaries regarded Mrs. Yates’s lack of softness as a deficiency.

Although most of the available information about Mrs. Yates’s performances dates from her later career (after 1759), and although actresses usually changed over the course of their careers, she maintained the “dignity” and “loftiness” that was probably already present in her first performance of *The Orphan of China* in 1759. When Garrick told Murphy at Mrs. Yates’s second audition for the play, “Mrs. Cibber’s acting would be no novelty but Mrs. Yates will excite the general admiration,” he was probably referring to her performance of haughtiness, which was in stark contrast to Cibber’s famous tenderness. In a letter to Voltaire in 1759, Murphy commends Mrs. Yates’s performance: “[If you had been present at the representation . . .] you would have beheld in Mandane a figure that would be an ornament to any stage in Europe, and you would have acknowledged that her acting promises to equal the elegance of her person.” Indeed, Mrs. Yates’s grand style in the role of Mandane, as indicated by Tilly Kettle’s illustration, confirms her ability to use majestic gestures in the expression of deep passions. Kettle’s “grand manner” (in the style of Sir Joshua Reynolds) seemed to capture “her majestic manner and deportment,” thereby elevating the status of the actress as well as the theatrical role (fig. 1).

Moreover, the “statuesqueness,” “dignity,” “weightiness,” “solemnity,” and “lack of tenderness” ascribed to Mrs. Yates’s tragic performance may have made Mandane’s wild and frantic passions seem more elegant. By employing passionate language and wild gestures, the actress emphasized the intensity of Mandane’s genuine grief as well as her “nobility and mother-love.” The quality of toughness in Mrs. Yates’s rendering of Mandane’s strongest passions (especially rage and desolation) enhanced the sincerity of the character’s maternal feeling. A contemporary critic observed: “She is too young

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56 Murphy, “Letter to M. De Voltaire” (30 April 1759), 96. The letter was appended to: the 1759 and 1772 London editions of *The Orphan of China*, published by Paul Vaillant (pp. 89–96); the 1759 Dublin edition by Ewing and so on; and the 1797 edition by George Cawthorn, but not to any other later editions or collections. I use the 1759 London edition.
58 The Tate Gallery display caption, August 2004.
for her role, but successfully played a virtuous woman who bravely loved her country and her son. Mrs. Yates was then thirty-one years old, but she effectively conveyed the image of a brave mother who hoped to rescue her twenty-year-old son. While the role of Mandane requires deep grief and wild passion, Mrs. Yates’s “statuesque” manner and “lack of tenderness” underscored the strength of Mandane’s maternal feeling. Her portrayal suggested women’s ascendancy, not only in the domestic sphere, but also in the public political sphere, thereby minimizing the negative connotations of female irrationality. Thus, Mrs. Yates’s unbending performance of Mandane’s majestic manner elevated the moral stature of the character she played, and diminished her association with conspicuous consumption, thereby distinguishing her from lesser women.

Furthermore, the play’s sympathetic depiction of Mandane’s resistance to Zamti’s patriotic zealotry is echoed in the prologue and the epilogue, both of which criticize Chinese (and implicitly French) loyalty to the absolutist sovereign. The prologue calls Zamti a “dubious character” and a “patriot zealous in a monarch’s cause!” (13–14), while the epilogue challenges the idea that his “eastern virtues” and “patriot passions” (13) can be heroic themes. Disparaging the loyalist patriotism that deprives Zamti of

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60 Lloyd’s Evening Post, 4: 25
human affection for his own son, the prologue blames Chinese absolutist doctrines for Zamti’s “undistinguish’d loyalty” (21) and for the unnaturalness (“Where nature shrinks”) of a patriotic zealotry that sins against essential human nature (22). While acknowledging Zamti’s dilemma, the prologue endorses Britain’s new political system, which privileges freedom of choice, justice, and mercy over the divine right of kings:

From nobler motives our allegiance springs,  
For Britain knows no Right Divine in Kings;  
From freedom’s choice that boasted right arose,  
And thro’ each line from freedom’s choice it flows.  
Justice, with Mercy join’d, the throne maintains;  
And in his People’s Hearts our Monarch reigns. (25–31)

The notion that a good ruler should win the people’s heart points to the contemporary English paradigm of a benevolent monarch operating within an ideal system of constitutional monarchy. Mandane’s political view echoes not only those expressed in the prologue and epilogue, but also those in Murphy’s other writings. In *Gray’s Inn Journal*, Murphy mentions that the English public had “exploded all notions of the right divine of Kings [and considered] crowned heads as no more than common men.”

Sources and Transformation

The fact that *The Orphan of China* is both an adaptation of a French play and a critique of French absolutism seems incongruous. Although Voltaire’s *L’Orphelin de la Chine* (1755) was an important source for *The Orphan of China*, Murphy first appropriated and then deliberately subverted the French text in order to attack England’s enemy at a historical moment of intense national patriotism. This produced other incongruities: in much the same way that Yates’s costume simultaneously repudiated and fed the desire for a sought-after commodity, Voltaire’s *L’Orphelin* provoked anxiety while kindling desire. In a defensive epistle to Voltaire in 1759, Murphy wrote in a nationalist tone:

Sir, A LETTER to you from an English author will carry with it the appearance of corresponding with the enemy; not only as the two nations are at present involved in a difficult and important war, but also because in many of your late writings you seem determined to live in a state of hostility with the British Nation. (89)

This “open” letter to Voltaire might be viewed as strategic. Perhaps Murphy stressed his patriotism in an effort to defend his Chinoiserie play against Garrick’s Francophobic audience. In the letter, Murphy first defends the originality of his own play against charges of undue influence by Voltaire, and then responds to Voltaire’s dedication of *L’Orphelin* to the Duke of Richelieu, in which the French author claims that the original

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61 China’s despotism exercised supreme patriarchal authority by the emperor in a state conceived of as a large family. Having constructed a moralistic rationale based on paternal authority, Confucians emphasized the importance of fulfilling one’s proper role in society, either as “fathers and children; prince and subjects; husband and wife; elder and younger brothers; friend to friend.” See “Of Moral Philosophy among the Chinese,” in volume 3 of Du Halde’s *Description de la Chine.


63 Harold L. Bruce mentions the dramatic situations and dialogues in Murphy’s adaptation that are similar to Voltaire’s; see Bruce, “Voltaire on the English Stage,” *University of California Publications in Modern Philology*, 8, no. 1 (June 1918): 142–49.
Chinese play is “barbarous” owing to its incredible events. In this sense, it is like “the monstrous Drama of Shakespeare and Lopez de Vega.” Murphy defends Shakespeare against Voltaire’s attack, characterizing the English playwright as a national genius and implicitly aligning himself with him, and his own tragedy with Shakespeare’s drama. This not only elevates his own work, but also distinguishes characteristics of English drama from the French.

This letter suggests that many English were ambivalent about French high culture, which may also explain Garrick’s interest in producing an adaptation of Voltaire’s play—a production that featured the Chinoiserie style—even after the 1755 riot at The Chinese Festival. Despite their general hostility toward the French colonists who competed with them for territory and trade, many of the English admired French artists and writers. Because of his international reputation and his criticism of the French monarchy and Catholicism, Voltaire was especially popular. Smollett said that he endorsed the translation of Voltaire because Voltaire shared certain characteristics with some of the best English writers (“that impetuosity of genius, that luxuriance of imagination and freedom of spirit”). Several translations of Voltaire’s works were published in England, and London’s theatrical seasons often featured adaptations of his plays—all of which confirms Voltaire’s popularity in eighteenth-century England.

Murphy, along with several of his English reviewers, was unwilling to acknowledge Voltaire’s influence on The Orphan of China. In his letter to Voltaire, the playwright minimized his indebtedness to the French philosophe, claiming that his dramatic narrative drew primarily from Richard Hurd’s commentary on the Chinese original. In the prologue to The Orphan of China, William Whitehead failed to credit the French source by Voltaire, and mentioned only the more remote Chinese source:

> On eagle wings the poet of to-night  
> Soars for fresh virtues to the source of light,  
> To China’s eastern realms: and boldly bears  
> Confucius’ morals to Britannia’s ears. (prologue 1–4)

A contemporary reviewer attempted to clarify the source-analogue relationship between Murphy’s and Voltaire’s plays by asserting that the former’s tragedy “is not a translation of Voltaire’s celebrated L’Orphelin de la Chine, but rather a new English play, formed upon the Frenchman’s model, with considerable improvements of the plan.” D. E. Baker asserted that “whatever Assistances he [Murphy] may have had Recourse

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64 Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet), The Orphan of China: A Tragedy. Translated from the French of M. de Voltaire (London: Baldwin, 1756), xi–xii.
66 Garrick’s production of Jean-Georges Noverre’s The Chinese Festival (1755), a French Chinoiserie ballet, triggered a riot mainly because of the conflict between the upper sort’s taste for exotic novelty and the lower order’s patriotic xenophobia; see Deryck Lynham, The Chevalier Noverre: Father of Modern Ballet, a Biography (London: Dance Books, 1972), 20ff.
to for the laying [of] his Foundation, the Superstructure must be allowed his own.”

Jesse Foot, who drew attention to the fact that Murphy’s adaptation was translated and performed successfully in the French theatre, also argued that Murphy’s tragedy was more than an imitation of Voltaire’s work:

It has been frequently asserted by the ignorant and the envious, that Orphan of China was little more than a translation from a play of Voltaire. The obligations, however, of the English to the French writer are not such as to deprive the former of the character of originality; to which, indeed, the French stage has given a decided testimony;—a translation of Mr. Murphy’s play having been acted there with great applause, so late as the year 1807.

Oliver Goldsmith, who believed that Murphy had elevated the play, wrote: “in proportion as the plot has become more European, it has become more perfect. By omitting many of the circumstances of the original story . . . Mr. Murphy has given us a play, if not truly Chinese, at least entirely poetical.” Taken as a whole, these remarks indicate that the English were determined to represent the Chinese in ways that were not mere imitations of the French, but rather a new English version of the Chinoiserie play.

Precisely because the English were so eager to defend Murphy’s play from accusations of French influence, it is crucial to explore how Murphy distinguished his plot, themes, and characterization from Voltaire’s. In L’Orphelin de la Chine, Voltaire created Chinese characters that challenged Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s philosophical positions while affirming his own. Voltaire focused on the dialectic between civilization and barbarity, and portrayed an idealized vision of China as a nation ruled by benevolent philosophers. This is precisely what Murphy reacted against. In The Dramatic Career of Arthur Murphy, H. H. Dunbar states that Voltaire’s motive of the salutary influence of Chinese civilization on the barbarian invaders “did not affect Murphy at all.” This is probably an overstatement. Voltaire’s apparent belief in the supremacy of Chinese civilization and Confucian patriarchal paternalism did, after all, provoke a reaction from Murphy. Although L’Orphelin was not performed in London during the eighteenth century, Murphy and his audience would surely have known the English translations of Voltaire’s play published in London in 1755 and 1756. Thus it is likely that Voltaire’s adaptation influenced both Murphy’s adaptation and the audiences’ reception of the play. A summary of Voltaire’s version will therefore shed light on the significance of Murphy’s tragedy.

Voltaire’s major themes focus on Idamé’s three kinds of love: her parental love for her son, her past love affair with Gengis Khan, and her marital love for Zamti, who also demands of her the duty of a loyal subject. Idamé, having learned of Zamti’s intended sacrifice of their son, accuses him of barbarity (act 2, scene 3). Zamti replies that Idamé was a subject before she was a mother and that duty should take precedence over nature. Idamé casts doubt on Zamti’s concept of patriotism, which, from her perspective, suppresses maternal feeling, thereby distorting the laws of nature. Arguing for her son’s right to life, Idamé speaks for Voltaire’s Enlightenment doctrines, which hold that every

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71 Foot, The Life of Arthur Murphy, 155.
73 Chinoiserie was a fashion trend that went beyond costume and clothing.
74 Dunbar, Dramatic Career of Arthur Murphy, 66.
human being, even an infant, has a right to live. Nevertheless, Idamé soon swallows her maternal instinct, surrenders to her husband’s patriarchal authority, and conforms to Confucianism. Compared to Mandane, she is less able to articulate her motherly affection, and she converts more readily to patriarchal orthodoxy than Mandane does. In addition, conflicts between the heroine and her husband do not trigger as much familial dissension in Voltaire’s play as they do in Murphy’s. After Idamé reveals the identity of the Chinese prince to Gengis Khan, her priorities soon shift from parental love to marital fidelity and love of her country. The maternal love that Idamé defended so forcefully gives way to her sense of duty as wife and loyal subject. She is therefore more submissive to patriarchy than her counterpart in Murphy’s play.

Voltaire was not an active champion of equality for women, though scholars hold polarized views of Voltaire’s ideas about women. M. S. Rivière, who studied Voltaire’s observations on women’s memoirs, concludes that Voltaire’s condescending attitude and insensitivity to the values of women memorialists, so typical of the majority of his fellow philosophes, may well provide strong evidence of Virginia Woolf’s claim in A Room of One’s Own that male prejudices and values generally impeded women’s writings in the eighteenth century.75

Arthur Scherr, however, maintains that both Voltaire’s personal life and Candide “attest to his respect for women’s experience and his belief in equality and reciprocity between the sexes.”76 Voltaire may or may not have been influenced by his mistress, Mme du Chatelet, who defended women’s capacities in the introduction to her translation of Mandeville’s Fable of the Bees, stating: “If I were King, I would reform an abuse which curtails . . . half of human kind. I would cause women to participate in all the rights of humanity, and those of the spirit.”77 Voltaire declared a firm belief in the need for equal education for both sexes. He also noted discrepancies in the legal codes that excluded women from any position in public life, maintained, unlike Rousseau, that “women are capable of all that men are,” and objected to the idea of the husband as sole master in the home.78 Yet, in L’Orphelin de la Chine, Voltaire presented the image of a Chinese woman in the same way that he rendered his vision of China, shaping both to conform with his own philosophical views.79

Murphy, who transformed French-inflected Chinese exoticism and absolutism into English aspirations for national liberty, also succeeded in rendering Mandane as a more sympathetic, resolute, and self-assured heroine. His departure from Voltaire’s pseudo-Confucian ideas about women can perhaps be ascribed to an emerging intellectual trend that connected better treatment of women with social progress. While European anthropological discourse often used Oriental women’s low status as evidence of

the backwardness of Eastern cultures. Murphy’s English contemporaries regarded themselves as advanced thinkers with respect to the treatment of women. Like John Duncombe’s *The Feminiad* (1754), John Millar’s *Observations Concerning the Distinction of Ranks in Society* (1771), and William Alexander’s *The History of Women* (1779), all of which use the status of women as an indicator of cultural progress, Murphy’s tragedy might be seen as *emancipatory*—a call for national progress and social improvement. And if so, his play shares in a larger patriotic enterprise during the Seven Years’ War: to demonstrate English cultural superiority in relationship to France.

**Women and Social Progress**

Murphy’s Oriental heroine defies assumptions about the subordination of women when she elevates the interests of the individual and the family above duty to the state. Condemning Zamti’s failure to protect their son, Mandane insists that loyalty to one’s family is more important than loyalty to a monarch (2.423–27). Attributing her wild behavior to the influence of nature’s truthful voice, Mandane begs Zamti to save their son: “‘Tis nature’s voice that pleads; nature alarm’d, / Quick, trembling, wild, touch’d to her inmost feeling, / When force would tear her tender young ones from her” (2.442–44). When Mandane bursts onto Timurkan’s palace to claim Hamet as her wrongfully imprisoned son, her sincere maternal feeling touches even Timurkan, who believes that Mandane is telling the truth: “In her wild vehemence of grief I hear / The genuine voice of nature” (3.356–57). Mandane’s outburst might be seen as an assertion of individual agency; if this interpretation is justified, she not only repudiates conventional feminine modesty, but also challenges autocratic and patriarchal hegemony. Mandane’s choice of freedom from her duty as a subject challenges the patriarchal limited view of female destiny and subverts the conventions of female modesty. Murphy was apparently sympathetic to Mandane, who seems to personify benign, “natural” human affection for one’s own offspring. Perhaps for this reason, her defiance of her husband’s will and apparent individual agency in an extremely patriarchal environment seem justified.

The presence of a defiant Oriental heroine in Murphy’s play echoes widespread debates about the role of women in society in an era when women’s status was beginning to change. In Murphy’s time, Christian theologians were still arguing that women’s nature made them inherently more susceptible to passions of the flesh, thus blinding them to reason and morality. At the same time, women’s social status was rising, albeit gradually, as they began to compete with men in the intellectual sphere. During the eighteenth century, a significant increase in female literacy, which had been limited to the higher ranks of society before 1660, was accompanied by increased interest in issues that concerned women. Addison and Steele’s *Spectator* (1711–12), Eliza Haywood’s *Female Spectator* (1744–46), and the *Gentleman’s Magazine* (1731–1914) regularly carried

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articles about women’s lack of educational and economic opportunities, marriage inequities, and so on. Although men play an essential part in Haywood’s narratives (as both reformers of women and targets of reform), her periodical was by and for women. The Spectator devoted much attention to women’s concerns, exhorting them to behave according to their nature as rational beings. In the Gentleman’s Magazine, one of the eighteenth century’s most popular journals, some articles seek to explain women’s subordinate place in society, while others criticize their lack of opportunities and treat them sympathetically. The large number of publications urging women to stay in the domestic sphere indicates that many of them were otherwise engaged. Investigating the London literary marketplace between 1678 and 1730, Paula McDowell discovered women’s extensive participation in a wide range of publishing activities, which belies the idea that they had no agency in the political public sphere. Indeed, George Ballard’s Memoirs of Several Ladies (1752), John Duncombe’s The Feminiad (1754), and Bonnell Thornton and George Colman’s Poems by Eminent Ladies (1755) celebrate the contributions of English women writers.

Murphy’s depiction of Mandane suggests that he too was aware of the role played by women in the construction of English national identity. In other writings that enter into contemporary literary and theatrical debates about gender roles, he expresses similar views. When Henry Fielding dedicated his first play, Love in Several Masques (first acted in 1727), to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, he commended her talent as “a living confutation of those morose schoolmen, who would confine knowledge to the male part of the species.” Murphy demonstrated a similar attitude toward women in his biographical essay on Fielding (1762), when he praised several female writers and artists. In addition, Murphy made a particular study of the female character in his writings. In Gray’s Inn Journal, he remarked favorably on intelligent women, while satirizing women who were susceptible to French fashions or needed masculine protection. Murphy’s attention to women also characterizes his dramatic writings. Most of the heroines in his comedies are witty, confident, and active, and his tragic heroines are complex and invested with plot significance. In The Grecian Daughter (1772), for instance, Murphy’s depiction of Euphrasia’s nobility is reminiscent of some classical tragic heroines’ intelligence, bravery, and self-reliance—so much so that Elizabeth Inchbald praised the Grecian daughter for being a valorous heroine who “performs that which a whole army has in vain attempted.”

The performance of The Orphan of China is intriguing and may reflect emerging views on English women’s sexuality. This can be seen in both the characterization of the heroine, Mandane, and in the social identity of Mrs. Yates, the actress who played her. Mandane and Mrs. Yates not only crossed boundaries between private and public

84 See, for instance, The Spectator 30.
85 See, for instance, Gentleman’s Magazine viii, 85–87; v, 588–89.
spheres, but also endeavored to resist sexual objectification. Mandane challenged existing views of women as domestic and private, while Mrs. Yates, whose identity as a working professional came with an independent income, enjoyed public celebrity. In this sense, both challenged dominant cultural restrictions on gender prescribed by the ideology of separate spheres (public for men, and private for women). This analogy became even more obvious when, in 1773, Mrs. Yates co-managed the King’s Theatre with Frances Brooke, whose career as a fiction writer, playwright, and theatre manager was mixed up with politics. In 1787, after Mrs. Yates died, Brooke published a memoir in the *Gentleman’s Magazine,* in which she argued for her friend’s respectability, basing her claim on the fact that ladies of quality accepted Mrs. Yates into their circles. She wrote that “her society [was] to be sought by a distinguished part of those in high-life, whose talents and virtues gave additional lustre to their rank, as well as by the most respectable characters in the world of literature” (586). In other words, Murphy’s depiction of Mandane echoes contemporary gender discourse about English women with public professions—including actresses. While onstage, Mrs. Yates performed the imaginary personage of Mandane; in turn, the fabricated character of Mandane embodied, rehearsed, and re-enacted real-life women like Mrs. Yates.

**National Cultural Identity**

English national cultural identity began to form in earnest between 1689 and 1815 thanks in large part to the colonial rivalry between England and France. Both *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* translated ongoing political battles against the French into a culture war, which is manifested in Murphy’s play through the characters’ resentment of foreign political and cultural hegemony. When the Chinese prince, Zaphimri, visits Hamet in the prison, the latter acknowledges Zaphimri’s amity and contrasts his “sense of ancient worth”—his respect for traditional culture—with the “foreign force and foreign manners [of their] degenerate age” (4.41–42). Expressing his high regard for Zaphimri, Hamet condemns the Tartars’ military and cultural invasions:

> Then my heart
> Accepts thy proffer’d friendship;—in a base,
> A prone, degen’rate age, when foreign force,
> And foreign manners have o’erwhelm’d us all,
> And sunk our native genius;—thou retain’st
> A sense of ancient worth. (4.39–44)

Perhaps unintentionally, the mise en scène for *The Orphan of China,* which spiced English sensibility with Chinese scenery, props and costumes, also gave tangible form to the ongoing culture war against foreign influence. In act 3, for example, the scene is set in “a temple [with] several tombs up and down the stage.” This stage direction sug-

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gests that the scenery follows English convention by depicting the Chinese emperor’s
tombs as located within the cloisters of a temple. Indeed, illustrations of eighteenth-
century performances of the play suggest a mixture of Western and exotic styles. Much
as Murphy’s tragedy defied Voltaire’s views of China and women, Garrick’s staging
reacted against the French Chinoiserie productions. Although the Rococo style spread
from France to England at about the middle of the eighteenth century, a direct current
of Chinese influence arrived in England through architect William Chambers. Garrick
may have followed the more “romantic” design of Chambers’s Chinese architecture
and gardening rather than the French neoclassic hybrid.

Voltaire’s L’Orphelin de la Chine advertised “authentick” Chinese scenic designs and
costumes as its drawing card. Because Voltaire wished to establish a standard for authen-
ticity, twelve men worked day and night from 28 July until 17 August to construct and
paint a sumptuous Chinese setting. Contemporary audiences praised the production’s
“new and accurate Oriental costumes.” Charles Collé’s journal, which offers a record
of spectator response to the Chinoiserie costumes, properties, and architecture in the
1755 production of Voltaire’s play, commended the actress Mlle Clairon’s Chinoiserie
costumes “without paniers.” Denis Diderot, in “De la poesie dramatique,” praised
Voltaire’s play and Mlle Clairon’s “Chinese” dress for their Chinese verisimilitude. Many scholars have dwelt at length on the significance of Voltaire’s innovation. As
Hugh Honour puts it: “Probably to stress the country of origin, the actors were clothed
in full Chinese costumes, instead of the mildly exotic garments which had hitherto
been worn in plays and operas with oriental settings.” Helped by the actor Lekain,
Voltaire had begun a campaign for historically accurate costuming, which was at vari-
ance with Louis-Rene Boquet’s use of wide paniers (for both male and female costumes)
covered with Rococo detail. As the hero Gengis Khan, Lekain wore an embroidered
robe instead of the usual panier-skirt, and Mlle Clairon, as the heroine Idamé, wore a
simple sleeveless dress without hip-pads. Lekain and Clairon were early pioneers
in the development of authentic historic or realistic costume whose practices presaged
the triumph of Romanticism in the nineteenth century. In most of the traditional
French classic tragedies, leading men wore stiff skirts (tonnelets), helmets, and high
plumes, while the women wore large hoop skirts (paniers), elbow-length gloves, and
diamond-studded wigs regardless of nationality, period, or social position. In the 1755

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95 Ancient Chinese tombs were usually located in the wilderness, more likely on a mountain or
near a river. Even when royal tombs were located in a mausoleum, they were in the basement of a
palace-like building.

96 See the frontispiece to The Orphan of China, a tragedy by Arthur Murphy. As performed at the The-
atre-Royal, Drury Lane, in Bell’s British Theatre. vol. 24 (London: George Cawthorn, 1797). For more
information, see Hsin-yun Ou, “David Garrick’s Reaction against French Chinoiserie in The Orphan

97 William Chambers used the word “romantic” to describe Chinese architecture and gardening; see

98 Marvin Carlson, Voltaire and the Theatre of the Eighteenth Century (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press,
1998), 100.


102 The most concise descriptions of Clairon’s Chinoiserie costume can be found in “Clairon, Mlle”

103 Carlson, Voltaire and the Theatre of the Eighteenth Century, 100.
production of L’Orphelin, however, Clairon appeared without traditional panoply of *paniers*, fringed gloves, plumes, or voluminous wigs. Her costume reflected a significant break from long-standing cultural tradition.

Garrick also evinced an inclination for historical accuracy. This was in contrast to other English stage artists, who scarcely paid attention to “accurate” theatrical costuming until the end of the century, when fashion commentators began to assert that stage dresses “are no longer the heterogeneous and absurd mixtures of foreign and ancient Modes, which formerly debased our tragedies.”104 In his letter of 1759 to Voltaire, however, Murphy claims that if the French philosophe had attended the performance, he would have seen “a theatrical splendour conducted with a *bienséance* unknown to the *scène Française*” (96). This indicates that Garrick intended the staging of the play to be distinguished from Voltaire’s theatrical Chinoiserie, which Garrick’s friends in France had described to him in their correspondences.105

Although the plot of The Orphan of China depicts a conflict between the Tartars and mandarins, allusions to the ongoing war between France and England are unmistakeable. Its political positions seem especially English when characters repeatedly call for “liberty” and “freedom”—sentiments that seem alien in a Chinese environment. According to an illustration in Bell’s 1797 edition of the play, a Chinese dress was Yates’s only sign of Chinese-ness, for she does not don stylized or symbolic Chinese makeup or headdress. Audiences probably saw an obviously Anglo-European woman wearing an exoticized costume. The epilogue, which refers to Chinese women’s “broad foreheads and pigs eyes,” suggests that fundamental physical distinctions between the staged Chinese characters and the English actors who performed them make faithful theatrical representation impossible. However “authentically Chinese” the representation on the London stage may have appeared to the audience, spectators knew that the actors were not Chinese. Thus European performance of the exotic was inevitably limited in its attempts at authenticity.

If Garrick’s production of Murphy’s play exploited Chinese fashion in order to attract spectators, it also apparently played down any negative connotations of foreign influence. Such a balance of foreign and native elements would have guaranteed broader audience appeal. When M. R. Booth and colleagues observe that The Orphan of China undeniably owed some of its popularity to contemporary enthusiasm for Chinoiserie in art and decoration,106 he may not have considered the possibility that the play also repudiates excessive consumption of foreign fashion. The production’s refusal to create an accurate Chinese vista echoes the anti-Chinese message delivered by Mrs. Yates in the epilogue. The epilogue is indeed, according to Booth, “curious, for it undercuts the play and jeers at the Chinese in a manner that seems extreme, even in an era when epilogues were expected to be light in tone and mildly amusing about what had gone before.”107 I argue that the epilogue, which refutes Chinese customs in a seemingly light-hearted manner, is really intended to censure excessive consumption of foreign goods, thereby alleviating the negative implications of the play’s Chinoiserie staging.

105 A young Paris lawyer, Claude-Pierre Patu, had witnessed the Paris production of L’Orphelin de la Chine and reported his comments on it in a letter to Garrick; see Boaden, *Private Correspondence of David Garrick*, 2: 405.
107 Ibid; 156–57.
Perhaps the epilogue mocks Chinese “taste and fashions” (14) in order to detach Mrs. Yates from the malignant appeal of Chinese goods for English ladies, since female consumption of Chinese imports was considered likely to threaten national self-reliance. Critics like Oliver Goldsmith condemned the “perversion of taste [that] the refined European has, of late, had recourse even into China, in order to diversify the amusements of the day.” Women, who were frequent scapegoats for excessive consumption, and China, which manufactured these luxurious goods, were to blame for the corruption of English national cultural identity. In the epilogue, after Mrs. Yates is released from the role that has confined her to the theatrical world of ancient China, she expresses her delight:

Thro’ five long acts I’ve wore my sighing face,  
Confin’d by critic laws to time and place;  
Yet that once done, I ramble as I please,  
Cry London Hoy! and whisk o’er land and seas. (1–4)

Probably anticipating that many fashionable ladies would attend in order to see the display of Chinoiserie costumes, the epilogue is addressed to women in the audience. After Mrs. Yates apologized for her dress being “true Chinese,” she then distinguished between Chinese and English social customs. Yet, in order not to alienate members of the audience who favored Chinoiserie fashions, Mrs. Yates probably delivered her “dear small talk” in a playful and comic tone. Her interaction with a female member of the audience who asks her about the Chinese customs is light-hearted and intimate:

You’ve seen their eastern virtues, patriot passions,  
And now for something of their taste and fashions.  
O Lord! That’s charming—cries my Lady Fidget,  
I long to know it—Do the creatures visit?  
Dear Mrs. Yates, do, tell us—Well, how is it? (13–17)

The epilogue’s gratuitous mockery of the Chinese, with its personal reference to the actress, offers a strange counterpoint to the poignant dénouement of Murphy’s Chinese tragedy. Although the change of tone introduced by eighteenth-century epilogues was often detrimental both to the dramatic illusion and the play’s moral purpose, the change of tone in the epilogue to Murphy’s play may have had a special purpose. In contrast to the prologue’s portentous tone, the cheerful and dismissive tenor of the epilogue may have functioned as a distancing mechanism; if so, it might have freed both Mrs. Yates and the Chinoiserie staging from any malevolent associations with imported Chinese culture.

By invoking physical ugliness as a sign of moral degeneracy, the epilogue makes a sharp distinction between English and Chinese views on physical beauty: “First, as to beauty—Set your hearts at rest— / They’re all broad foreheads, and pigs eyes at best” (18–19). In Murphy’s time, physical deformity could still be read as a sign of inner defect. Although the eighteenth-century English had largely rejected the idea that bodily

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110 Aaron Hill, for instance, in the epilogue to his Alzira (1736), insists on the destructive effect of light epilogues following a highly moral tragedy.
deformity was a punishment from God, many still believed in a causal relationship between physical monstrosity and twisted character. Thus the epilogue’s reference to the supposed physical deformity of Chinese women may also connote the moral and cultural degeneracy of the Chinese. A short treatise titled “The Fundamental Laws of China,” which attributes the flat nose of the Chinese to their desire to distinguish themselves from foreigners, was attached to a review of The Orphan of China:

That if any foreigner be found . . . he is easily known to the world; for the Chinese have always been used to crush the noses of their children as soon as born, which render the greatest part of the Chinese flat-nosed, therefore any foreigner must be known by this distinction.

Although not factual, this passage does reflect a desire on the part of the English to distinguish themselves from Oriental peoples. Deriding the physical appearance of Chinese women, the epilogue adopts a view characteristic of English racial intolerance during this period. Moreover, the epilogue criticizes Chinese women’s physically coerced domestication; whereas English wives were free to join a variety of activities, the bound feet of Chinese wives kept them at home:

And then they lead such strange, such formal lives!—
   —A little more at home than English wives:
   Lest the poor things shou’d roam, and prove untrue,
      They all are crippled in the tiney shoe.
   A hopeful scheme to keep a wife from madding!
   —We pinch our feet, and yet are ever gadding,
      Then they’ve no cards, no routs, ne’er take their fling,
         And pin-money is an unheard-of thing! (20–27).

The epilogue uses Chinese women’s lack of physical and economic freedom as evidence of Chinese cultural inferiority. Significantly, an English actress who enjoyed both of these freedoms spoke the words of the epilogue, which may also be seen to mock Voltaire—who, after all, praised the Chinese wife’s submission in L’Orphelin de la Chine. In sum, the epilogue’s function is to accentuate English cultural superiority.

Conclusion

Paradoxically, the first production of The Orphan of China not only exploited the vogue for Chinoiserie, but also fueled English national patriotism. Projecting English social progress onto its Oriental subject, the play employed gender and Orientalist discourses, not only as polemical mechanisms to investigate the relationship between man and woman or between the Occident and the Orient, but also as nationalistic propaganda to celebrate English national identity by arguing for English cultural superiority over France.

In the play, Mandane’s opposition to Zamti’s benighted advocacy of divine kingship diminishes his otherwise heroic stature, but her credibility as a spokesperson for Enlightenment values may also have been compromised by the spectacle of an English actress playing an Oriental woman dressed in an exotic, but not fully authentic, Chi-

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noiserie costume. In this unlikely scenario, Mrs. Yates was simultaneously a dramatic character, a consumer of exotic imported goods, and a stage celebrity. Her presence onstage in a Chinoiserie costume must surely have affected audience reception of the ideas Murphy hoped to convey through his dramatic character. This article has argued that the first performance may have averted ambiguity by employing several devices to convey Mrs. Yates’s stage character to the audience. These devices include the epilogue’s identification of the actress with women of quality in the audience; the actress’s reported skill in conveying character through majestic elocution and gestures; the prologue’s censure of Chinese patriotism; and the epilogue’s rejection of Chinese customs.

In much the same way that Yates’s costume simultaneously repudiated and fed the desire for a sought-after commodity, Voltaire’s L’Orphelin de la Chine provoked anxiety among English artists, while kindling desire to see the play (or a version of it). In order to avoid accusations of excessive foreign influence, Murphy’s play (in contrast to Voltaire’s) refrained from glorifying the contemporary vogue for Chinese fashion, and transformed Chinese exoticism and French absolutism into English aspirations for national liberty. By rendering the Oriental heroine as a more sympathetic, self-assured character, Murphy departed from Voltaire’s pseudo-Confucian ideas about women. This may have been a response to contemporary debates in England about gender roles, when an emerging intellectual trend began to connect better treatment of women with social progress. The audience for Garrick’s production of The Orphan of China had a cross-cultural experience in which the dramatic character and the actress who embodied her were “othered” by both race and gender. In this sense, the play and the production not only reflected upon English national identity, but also endeavoured to inspire confidence in English cultural superiority.