

Dramatic Adaptation, Authorship and Cultural Identity in the Eighteenth Century. The Case of Samuel Foote

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Abstract

Literary adaptation flourished in eighteenth-century England in relation to drama. At the beginning of the century, Shakespearean and French rewritings were central to the critical debate on theatre and adapters boasted full authorial credentials, acquiring a dignified status. This condition dramatically changed in the second half of the century when the neoclassical concept of art as imitation was replaced by the development of the notion of creation as something original and unique. This paper aims at exploring the way authorship was affected by this reconfiguration through an analysis of the adapter and, in particular, through the analysis of Samuel Foote's *The Liar* (1762).

Keywords: Authorship, Drama Adaptation, Eighteenth Century, Genius, Samuel Foote.

1. *Adaptation and Eighteenth-Century Drama*

'Adapting' refers to a textual practice that formally and/or thematically transforms a text, re-contextualising it in another time, maybe in another culture or through another *medium*. The result is a palimpsest that, though new and different, still keeps a connection with the original. This link, that evidently recalls the question of how texts connect with one another, can be of various kinds and variously defined, finding a place in the broader twentieth-century debate on intertextuality, to put it with Julia Kristeva (1969), or of transtextuality, to recall Gérard Genette. Genette probably offered the most systematic classification of the phenomenon in *Palimpsests*, singling out a specific transtextual relation in which adaptation can be classified: 'By hypertextuality I mean any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary' (1997, 5). The present essay, however, will not limit itself to analysing the practice from a strictly textual perspective, but will also investigate the cultural process that determined its rise and diffusion and its role in the birth of the modern author. Compared to other contiguous forms of textuality, like free translation for instance, adaptation appears to be characterised by two elements: the assertion of authorship on the part of the adapter, and his/her use of prefaces, prologues, epilogues to explain

the kind of operation enacted on the hypotext. Evidently, then, adaptation emerges not only as a textual transformation *tout court* but also as a conscious authorial operation, whose reasons and conditions are essential to its analysis.

In England the practice of adaptation increased during the Restoration and mainly concerned drama, for well-known historical reasons. Charles II's return from exile inverted the *Interregnum's* austere climate, favouring a sort of 'merry England' atmosphere: theatres reopened after the Puritan repression and for playwrights it was not easy to keep pace with their Continental colleagues. Adaptation seemed an ideal solution to find continuity with their own past and to experience the new ideas coming from the Continent. Pauline Kewes suggests that, after the Restoration, the emergence of the notion of literary property and the consequent fear of being accused of plagiarism, induced authors to openly declare the source of their texts. The result was the proliferation of prefatory comments, also aiming at elevating the quality-standard of plays and fuelling the development of a serious literary debate on the theatre.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the drama was established as a literary form with serious artistic claims; its cultural stature had solidified. That process led to, and was assisted by, first, the development of dramatic criticism; second, the publication of collected editions of both Renaissance and post-Restoration plays; and, third, the improvement in the economic situation of playwrights, whose literary ambitions found expression in substantial prefatory epistles and accounts of whose lives and works were being written and disseminated with increasing frequency. (2001, 1)¹

Be it from Shakespeare or from classic and French drama (the main adapted subjects), adaptation was then complemented by substantial metatextual reflection, whose implications, however, require further explanations, going beyond the contingencies expressed in the quotation and involving a discussion on the aesthetic demands of the time. On the one hand, adaptation was motivated by the need to make foreign and pre-civil-war dramas understandable for the neo-bourgeois audience (who otherwise could hardly appreciate it); on the other, putting on stage the past with a scholarly contour was part of a broader process of appropriation of models, whose more or less latent aspiration was the reconfiguration of the English cultural identity in the aftermath of the Ancients versus Moderns *querelle*. The fracture produced by the *querelle* (that for the first time questioned the Western cultural heritage) doubled the historical trauma of the civil war and the execution of Charles I. This induced the formulation, on a literary level, of a position of compromise, whose social and political effects were those of reducing the distance between the Cavalier aristocracy and the Puritan middle-classes, whose contrast had been at the base of the civil war. As Giulio Marra underlines in his influential study on this period:

This attempt at compromise constitutes another distinctive element of English neoclassicism that therefore can be defined as the co-presence or convergence of two different cultural ideals: the Cavalier ideal, a version of classicism embodied by the educated courtesan, according to which man had to put his natural roughness right through classical elegance and scientific study ...; and the Puritan ideal that was imbued with Christianity and grounded on a severe discipline. ... In literature the Puritan ideal dictated contents reflecting middle class religion and morality, while the Cavalier model was tied to the necessity of formal perfection inspired by the knowledge and imitation of the classics. (1979, 39; my translation)

In other words, the Ancients versus Moderns opposition also recalled an internal division that needed to be solved and in whose resolution literature played a pivotal role.

The literary compromise accounted for the attempt to conciliate the severe observance of Aristotle's rules, mediated by French neoclassicism (in particular through Boileau) and the necessity to affirm the English literati's greatness and capacity to measure up with the classics. Adaptation proved a perfect arena in which to show this capacity, as it implied a direct, binary confrontation between texts, whose aim was not to create a literary culture on the ground of a heritage of commonly-established authority, but to show one's superiority over plays chosen precisely for their importance.

This is specifically the case of adaptations from French works which if, on the one hand, offered a moral and formal lesson welcome on the English stage – especially after the publication of Jeremy Collier's *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698) – on the other, could be further improved by adding new episodes and characters imbued with English qualities (common sense, reasonableness, etc.). It is worth recalling in this respect Richard Steele's *The Lying Lover* (1703), an adaptation of Pierre Corneille's *Le Menteur* (1642), in which the author smoothed down the original satirical and comical drive, inserting new episodes with didactical purposes. In the 'Premise', Steele states that

the Spark of this Play is introduced with as much Agility and Life, as he [Corneille] brought with him from France; and as much Humour as I could bestow upon him, in England. But he uses the Advantages of a learned Education, a ready Fancy, and a liberal Fortune, without the Circumspection and good Sense which should always attend the Pleasures of a Gentleman; that is to say, a reasonable Creature. (1766, 234)

Alternatively, the English adapters' purpose was to elevate modern culture to the same standards of formal order and *decorum* of the ancients, as happened with Shakespeare. Nahum Tate in the *Dedication* to his adaptation of *King Lear* (1681) defined the original: 'a heap of jewels, unstrung and unpolish' (1965, 203), while William Davenant, in the 'Prologue' to *The Tempest; or the Enchanted Island* (1667), adaptation of *The Tempest*, wrote: 'from old Shakespear's honour'd dust, this day / springs up and buds a new reviving play' (1965, 114).²

At least until the 1740s, adaptation was roughly motivated by these aesthetic/ethical reasons involving poetic justice, the Aristotelian rules, the moral function of drama, in the attempt to trace a continuity with the past (the classics), in which innovation could only be conceived as the final phase of a progressive process towards (formal) perfection. Neoclassicism conceived, in fact, originality as a form of imitation, an 'artistic imitation, then, in order to produce a more perfect work of art' (Marra 1979, 149; my translation). Furthermore, adaptations – with their apparatus of premises, prefaces, etc. – also served to illustrate and explain these intellectual efforts to the audience, so that the *ideal* spectators, addressees of the author/scholar, could somehow overlap with the *real* spectators, who needed a new cultural mediation to understand French theatre or Shakespeare. This feature represented the social aspect of the neoclassical compromise, i.e. the project of enlarging and forging an audience who could share the same set of values as the author, an intellectual who condensed Cavalier and Puritan qualities.

2. *Imitation versus Originality*

In the mid- and late eighteenth century, adaptation ceased claiming scholarly ambitions and became mere entertainment. The reasons are to be found in a general decline of the theatre after the spreading of the novel and after the passing of the Licensing Act in 1737.³ The law limited political satire through a severe censorship and allowed performances only in the two traditionally patented playhouses, Drury Lane and Covent Garden. The consequence was a general decrease of new plays, under the menace of the censor, and the definitive annulment of any potential competition between the two theatres. Their structures became bigger and bigger to welcome an increasing number of spectators (Covent Garden counted 1400 seats in 1732, 3000 in 1792; Drury Lane arrived at 3600 seats in the same years [Hume 2005, 322]), so that performances assumed a more popular connotation. The neoclassic aspiration of opening the debate on drama to an ever-larger audience, first to educate and then represent a learned bourgeoisie, had to face the laws of the marketplace, a shift which led critics to consider adaptations as plays with little literary ambition. But there is more.

The idea of art as imitation considerably changed in the second half of the century, going towards a new notion of creation as something unique and original, leading to

the growing valorization of creative originality. Subjectivity, uniqueness, and inspiration were certainly easier to achieve – and their lack more difficult to detect – in poetry, perhaps even in prose fiction, than in the drama. ... The eighteenth century did not invent 'originality'. Yet it was in that period that originality, hitherto conceived as an attribute of the literary work, came to be defined in terms of the creative process that produced it. (13)

The Augustan conception of art, close to an idea of creation as a derivative product – the so-called *inventio* (from the Latin *invenire*, ‘to find’), intended as finding and reassembling pieces of an already-existing tradition – gradually but markedly moved towards an idea of art as *invention* out of nothing, which would be definitively developed by the Romantics.⁴ The ramblings of this turn can be traced back to mid-century works such as Edward Young’s *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), William Duff’s *An Essay on Original Genius* (1766), or Alexander Gerard’s *Essay on Genius* (1776) which introduced originality and genius as the most important prerequisites of a work of art.⁵ To some extent, these art views, though so different, may be seen as the two sides of the same coin, in that they might be considered as different reactions to the process of ‘privatisation’ of the book that started with the establishing of a literary marketplace and of a modern copyright and that led to the individualisation of the creative process.⁶ The author had emerged as the only proprietor of his/her work at the end of the seventeenth century and the subsequent development of this process was his/her identification with an original creator, not indebted with other sources but his/her own imagination and inspiration.

Consequently, dramatic adaptation, whose source was clearly represented by the works of someone else, could no longer be aesthetically representative and, if part of the great amount of rewritings was due to the necessity to fill theatres or to escape censorship and did not deserve much critical discussion, it happened that even good-quality plays were neglected and sometimes even snubbed by critics as if unworthy of attention, just because they were non-original dramas:

Newspapers and journals, it is true, published reviews of newly premiered shows as well as revivals: however, those commentaries largely focused on performance, not literary quality. They customarily provided a plan or plot summary of the new offering, a convention that made the repetitive and derivative nature of modern playwriting all the more obvious. (13)

Adapters themselves seemed not to be particularly self-confident about their works. This change was registered in the two elements that characterise adaptation: the assertion of authorship and the use of paratexts. As Kewes shows, in the second half of the century we do not find exhaustive prefaces commenting on authorial textual operations but simple advertisements in which adapters briefly proclaim their debt to the original:

Where Restoration playwrights asserted authorship in their plays based on novels, romances, and history, as well as their adaptations of foreign and native drama, their eighteenth-century successors are a lot more cautious and modest. In their advertisements, they repeatedly style themselves editors and alterers rather than authors. (Kewes 2001, 2)⁷

There was no pride in asserting the authorship of rewritings and the practice itself lost the literary prerogatives it earlier displayed, though it continued to be successful on stage.

This situation produced a short-circuit polarised around the figures of the critic, supporter of originality, and the manager, interested in producing commercially consolidated, expendable plays (adaptations in most cases). The dramatic author found him/herself coming to terms with these extremes, a position that is difficult to analyse, especially when the three roles happened to overlap (an author could be simultaneously a manager or a critic). A relevant example (brilliantly discussed by Kewes in her article) comes from George Colman the elder's *The Man of Business* (1774), which presents in the 'Prologue' an Author with a manuscript in his hands, complaining about the manager's refusal to stage his original play:

See here, good folks, how genius is abus'd!
 A play of mine, the manager refus'd!
 And why?—I knew the reason well enough—
 Only to introduce his own damn'd stuff.
 Oh! he's an arrogant, invidious elf,
 Who hates all wit, and has no wit himself!
 As to the plays on which he builds his fame,
 Boasting your praise, *we all know whence they came.*

...

His play to-night, like all he ever wrote,
 Is pie-ball'd, piec'd, and patch'd, like Joseph's coat;
 Made up of shreds from Plautus and Corneille,
 Terence, Moliere, Voltaire, and Marmontel;
 With rags of fifty others I might mention,
 Which proves him dull and barren of invention:
 But shall his nonsense hold the place of sense?
 No, damn him! damn him, in your own defence!
 Else on your mercy will the dwarf presume,
 Nor e'er give giant Genius elbow-room. (42)

From this passage a pattern emerges which contrasts the original author with the 'derivative' author (also a manager), the one legitimised by the 'new' aesthetics of originality, the other by his commercial power and concern, driving him to refuse an original play. It is worth noticing how the epithet 'genius' is more than once called into question and directly attributed to the original author. The authorial configuration, despite the neat opposition, however, is far from appearing schematic and can be further explained by the epilogue of the same play, in which two more opinions are compared, the critic's and the spectator's. Echoing the author of the previous passage, the critic denounces appropriation to sanction the superiority of new plays:

What are the riff-raff of our modern plays?
 Their native dullness all in books intrench;
 Mere scavengers of Latin, Greek, and French,

Sweep up the learned rubbish, dirt, and dust,
 Or from old iron try to sile the rust.
 Give me the bard whose fiery disposition
 Quickens at once, and learns by intuition;
 Lifts up his head to think, and, in a minute,
 Ideas make a hurly-burly in it;
 Struggling for passage, there ferment and bubble,
 And thence run over without further trouble
 'Till out comes play or poem, as they feign
 Minerva issued from her father's brain!
 Be all original! struck out at once;
 Who borrows, toils, or labours, is a dunce:
 Genius, alas! is at the lowest ebb;
 And none, like spiders, spin their own sine web.
 What wonder, if with some success they strive
 With wax and honey to enrich the hive,
 If all within their compass they devour,
 And, like the bee, steal sweets from ev'ry slow'r?
 Old old books, old plays, old thoughts, will never do:
 Originals for me, and something new! (220)

The critic simply despises appropriation, referring to art as something coming out of the creator's mind (embodied by the bard) as Minerva from Jove's brains. All the ingredients of the mid- and late eighteenth-century aesthetic recipe recalled so far are visible. *Inventio* proves anachronistic but the character's last words – 'Originals for me' (my emphasis) – might be read as an attempt on the part of Colman, whose production was largely made up of adaptations, to relativise originality, making it appear as an *opinion* of the critic, soon subverted by the female spectator's speech:

New? (cries the lady) Prithee, man, have done!
 We know there's nothing new beneath the sun.
 Weave, like the spider, from your proper brains,
 And take at last a cobweb for your pains!
 What is invention? 'Tis not thoughts innate;
 Each head at first is but an empty pate.
 'Tis but retailing from a wealthy hoard
 The thoughts which observation long has stor'd,
 Combining images with lucky hit,
 Which sense and education first admit;
 Who, borrowing little from the common store,
 Mends what he takes, and from his own adds more,
 He is original; or inspiration
 Never fill'd bard of this, or other nation,
 And Shakespeare's art is merely imitation.
 For 'tis a truth long prov'd beyond all doubt,
 Where nothing's in, there's nothing can come out. (222)

The female spectator is entrusted with the task of defending the idea of art as assemblage of pre-existing pieces (significantly called 'imitation' even in relation to Shakespeare), and implicitly the practice of adaptation,⁸ allowing Colman to open a rift between the oriented taste promoted by criticism and the effective reception of the plays.

3. *Cultural Identity, French Adaptations and Samuel Foote's 'The Liar' (1762)*

The emergence of the originality/genius theory also had some cultural conceptual motives: indeed, if behind neoclassical aesthetics there was what we could define as 'the project of compromise' whose political implication was that of condensing Puritan and Cavalier values (literarily and socially), what was the idea behind the aesthetic of originality? Let me suggest that the literary shift from imitation to originality was part of a complex ideological pattern, in which the British *political*, rather than literary identity was at stake. This is apparent in the way the critical attitude towards Shakespeare dramatically changed in the second half of the century. While critics were at first interested in 'improving' the Bard, in order to make him comparable with the classics, subsequently, Shakespeare became pivotal to a rhetorical construction that celebrated him as the 'national poet' and later as the 'universal poet' (see Golinelli 2003, 158-159). Shakespeare became the personification of the modern English State that, after the post-Restoration process of self-reconstruction, felt ready to export its new image on an international scenario. The claim of universality for Shakespeare and so for the British 'spirit', on the one hand, seemed to be (at least at an initial phase) in line with the cosmopolitan rhetoric of the Enlightenment, as it called on transnational values; on the other, it implied in fact that those values were essentially English, thus supporting a nationalist policy but projected on a world scale through colonialism (that was rapidly developing in those years). Not by chance, in that period, Shakespearean revivals became very celebrative with the presence of the character of Shakespeare's ghost on stage, while the adaptations of his works significantly diminished.

By contrast, the attitude towards the other great source of inspiration for adaptation, i.e. French theatre, became very controversial. The amount of French appropriations considerably grew, partly for commercial reasons (also to fill the gap of decreasing Shakespearean adaptations), partly because France had entered by now the collective imagination with great dramatic models, from Corneille to Molière. This element could appear surprising given the strong concern with the national question and confirmed the existence of a gap between literary criticism and theatrical practice, in relation to popular taste. Paris was the most fashionable destination for Grand Tours and people delighted in watching shows referring to French culture but authors almost felt obliged to apologise in prologues and epilogues for the recourse to French

material. And as Kinne makes it clear, ‘... these apologies were quite apt to be coupled with boasts of English material glory or Shakespeare’s superiority’ (1967, 13). For instance, Richard Cumberland, in the ‘Prologue’ to his play *The Brothers* (1769), wrote:

Various the shifts of authors now-a-days,
 For operas, farces, pantomimes, and plays;
 Some scour each alley of the town for wit,
 Begging from door to door the offal bit;
 ...
 Some, in our English classics deeply read,
 Ransack the tombs of the illustrious dead;
 Hackney the muse of Shakespear o’er and o’er,
 From shoulder to the flank, all drench’d in gore.
 Others, to foreign climes and kingdoms roam,
 To search for what is better found at home:
 The recreant bard, oh ! scandal to the age!
 Gleams the vile refuse of the Gallic stage.
 Not so our bard—To-night, lie bids me say,
 You shall receive and judge an English play. (1808, 310)

At the same time, in February 1763 *The Monthly Review* reported the following comment: ‘The custom of copying from the French appears to be so thoroughly established with our dramatic poets, that the best of them do not disdain to adopt the practice’ (quoted in Kinne 1967, 13).

Adapters from French works, in other words, *had* to show consternation for using Gallic sources, which nonetheless they admired to the point of using them for their own plays. A further explanation of this ambivalent attitude towards French models may take into account the possibility that French adaptations responded to the national concern and to the aesthetic debate of the time playing on ambivalence itself and on French sources much more freely than was allowed with British texts.

An interesting example in this respect is offered by Samuel Foote, one of the most significant dramatists in respect to French adaptation and certainly a controversial figure of the eighteenth century. He wrote some thirty comedies, was the lead actor of his own company and manager of the Haymarket Theatre (a summer theatre for which he obtained the royal licence in 1766). At his time, he was famous for his pungent satire, often addressed to his own contemporaries (for which he was feared and disapproved of by other authors and critics), but also for being a brilliant mimic whose talent and stage charisma were not lessened by the accident that caused the amputation of his leg. His plays were not only put on stage at the Haymarket but some of them were regularly performed at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. Even after his death in 1777 single and collected editions of his works were pub-

lished and sold out until the end of the nineteenth century. Yet, this figure was surrounded by a halo of moral and aesthetic disapproval, probably due to the popular nature of his theatre, and this prejudice resisted until the last decade of the twentieth century. Only recently critics have re-evaluated his works and, though the *corpus* of writings on him is very limited, he stands out as a significant character. As Susan Lamb puts it,

In the more thorough or recent studies, critics have addressed formal issues such as whether or not Foote is sentimental; performance and more strictly theatrical issues such as the function (as opposed to the fact) of Foote's mimicry, his experimental staging, and his theatre management; and, to a limited extent, how Foote's work fits into larger cultural trends. (1996, 245)

Implicitly, Lamb suggests the importance of investigating this last aspect, offering an interesting analysis of the way Foote was concerned with British national identity, an analysis that revises the xenophobic reputation of the dramatist.⁹ Yet, though recognising that Foote's position was very sophisticated in this respect, she comes to the following conclusion:

Over the body of his work, Foote naturalizes certain things (French plays, French education) of 'foreign' origin by recasting them as British, while he depicts criminal or socially unacceptable behaviour as a 'foreign' (most often French or colonial) adulteration of essential national identity. (Lamb 1996, 250)

What I would like to stress here is that the crucial missing point in the discussions so far recalled is that Foote was essentially an adapter working on French sources, which further complicates the textual analysis of his plays.¹⁰ If it is true that 'Foote's plays are intimately bound up in the contemporary collective re-imagining of national identity' (Lamb 1996, 246), it is also true that this re-imagining was imbued with foreign models and that these models fostered not only the redefinition but also the critique of British cultural and literary identity.

This is particularly evident in *The Liar* (1762), an adaptation of *Le menteur* by Pierre Corneille. The story of the liar Dorante was certainly not new even when Corneille staged his play, being itself an adaptation of *La Verdad Sospechosa* (1630) by Juan Ruiz de Alarcón (a play erroneously attributed by Corneille to Lope de Vega). The protagonist of *Le menteur* is a young man who meets two women in Paris, Lucrece and Clarice, and decides to woo the latter, thinking her name is Lucrece. When his father Geronte announces he has found him a wife (Clarice), the liar, believing it is Lucrece, pretends to be already married. After many incidents, the truth comes out and Dorante's lies are punished by a forced marriage with Lucrece, the woman he does not love; in the end, however, he quickly changes his mind and realises he is in love with her. Corneille reworks the Spanish baroque theme of confusion and instability but gives the play a classical structure, insisting on the comical ef-

fect rather than on the moral lesson quite explicit in Alarcón and making the ending more cohesive with the genre (indeed the final love twist functions as a solution and not a punishment).

Foote's *The Liar* is inspired by the French and not by the Spanish play, even though in the prologue the author wrote:

We bring tonight a stranger on the stage,
His sire De Vega; We confess the truth
Lest you mistake him for a British Youth.

And after a comical defence of his habit of ridiculing living persons, he forbids any one to see a caricature in this play in the following words:

But in the following group let no man dare
To claim a limb, nay, not a single hair.
What gallant Briton can be such a sot
To own the child a Spaniard has begot? (Foote 1830, 82)¹¹

The reference to de Vega paradoxically makes it clear that Foote's source was Corneille as Mary Megie Belden underlines:

... if he was actually acquainted with the Spanish play that he means to have us believe his source, he made an odd mistake in ascribing it to the same wrong author that Pièrre [sic] Corneille had ascribed it to when he adapted it for the French theatre. ... Since he never hits upon a variant that recalls this play, he must have known it only through the medium of Corneille's *Menteur*, to which he owes obvious debts. (1929, 188)¹²

By mentioning de Vega, Foote probably believed he had recognised his debt to the 'original' author, which was in line with the cultural trend of the time. In effect, his adaptation re-elaborates precisely the elements inserted by Corneille – the comical relationship between master and valet, the character of the valet itself, the presence of the city setting – and further modifies the ending, proposing a brilliant but quite ambiguous solution of the action. Needless to say, his aim is that of offering a satirical portrait of London and its inhabitants, and of the cultural climate of the period, through typified characters, plots and situations that the audience could easily recognise.

In Foote's text, the protagonist Jack Wilding arrives in London from Oxford, where he is a student, to have fun and amusement in the capital city, accompanied by his valet Papillon. The encounter with Miss Grantam and Miss Godfrey and the subsequent development of the action repeats Corneille's plot, but in the ending Old Wilding (Jack's father) and Miss Grantam arrange a sort of comical revenge/punishment, instructing the maid Kitty to act the role of young Wilding's imaginary wife (he had made up a brilliant lie to make

his father believe he was married). A character invented by the liar ‘magically’ turns into a person in flesh and blood, so that the confines between reality and imagination comically blur.

Though presented with a light touch, the main concerns of the play are the question of British/French identity, the state of literary criticism and the reference to the genius theory. These three major issues are developed from the starting point of Corneille’s treatment of the seeming/being dichotomy (which in turn ‘translate’ Alarcón’s baroque sense of uncertainty).

For example, in Act 1, Papillon gives an account of London manners, following Corneille’s text in which Cliton is entrusted with the task of presenting Paris with its many types of people:

Pap. You must not expect, Sir, to find here, as at Oxford, men appearing in their real characters: everybody there, Sir, knows that Mr. Muffy is a fellow of Maudlin, and Tom Trifle a student of Christ-church; but this town is one great comedy, in which not only the principles, but frequently the persons, are feign’d. ... In short, Sir, you will meet with lawyers who practice smuggling, and merchants who trade upon Hounslow-heath; reverend Atheists, right honourable sharpers, and Frenchmen from the county of York. (7-8)

However, while in Corneille’s text the description of the city remains generic with a quick reference to deception as a consequence of the coexistence of people from many different places, in Foote’s play, falseness of appearance (explicitly referred to identity and to the difficulty of interpreting people) is veined with a subtle awareness of social hypocrisy. Whereas Corneille immediately shifts on the battle between sexes (as the valet Cliton advises Dorante about women’s dangerousness), Foote seems more concerned with unmasking duplicity. Yet, the author does not want to simplify the seeming/being opposition by separating the two terms; the final effect he seems to point at is the presentation of a complex reality, in which the problem of truth conveys a reflection on questions that are missing in the hypotext (like, for instance, the implications of the identification between truth and ‘original’ on a literary level). So, *The Liar* does not simply transpose the themes presented by Corneille by culturally ‘translating’ French vices; he uses the hypotext as a basic structure, which he modifies in order to discuss specific problems of his time. For example, the valet Cliton turns into the figure of Papillon (an Englishman who pretends to be French) who, though keeping the same task of advisor and offering the same kind of comical gags, has a new dramatic function: his disguise (one of Foote’s original inventions) poses cultural questions we do not find in *Le Menteur*.

Y. Wild. But to the point: Why this disguise? Why renounce your country?

Pap. There, Sir, you make a little mistake; it was my country that renounced me (9).

When questioned by Wilding, Papillon tells his story starting when, after a proper education, he 'got recommended to the compiler of the Monthly Review' (9). His words emphasise Foote's provocative attitude towards criticism (at the time not benevolent and even snobbish towards his plays), which appears as a centre of power and privilege controlling knowledge and establishing whether a text is good or bad, independently from its true qualities:

Pap. The whole region of the belles lettres fell under my inspection; physic, divinity, and the mathematics, my mistress managed herself. There, Sir, like another Aristarch, I dealt out fame and damnation at pleasure. In obedience to the caprice and commands of my master, I have condemn'd books I never read; and applauded the fidelity of a translation, without understanding one syllable of the original.

Y. Wild. Ah! Why, I thought acuteness of discernment and depths of knowledge were necessary to accomplish a critic.

Pap. Yes, Sir; but not a monthly one. Our method is very concise. We copy the title-page of a new book; we never go any further. If we are ordered to praise it, we have at hand about ten words, which, scatter'd through as many periods, effectually does the business; as, 'laudable design, happy arrangement, spirited language, nervous language, nervous sentiment, elevation of thought, conclusive argument'. If we are to decry, then, we have, 'unconnected, flat, false, illiberal, stricture, reprehensible, unnatural'. And thus, Sir, we pepper the author and, soon rid our hands at his work. (9-10)

In this passage, stress shifts from falseness of appearance to falseness of judgment but, as Papillon explains later (providing a little revenge for Foote, whose plays were very successful), 'Notwithstanding what we say, people will judge for themselves: our work hung upon hand, and all I could get from the Publisher was four shillings a-week and my small beer' (10). It is difficult not to catch a parallelism here with Colman's critic/spectator dichotomy.

Claiming the freedom of art from critical theories (in many respects false and useless according to the playwright), Foote also condemns the privileged status of the critic, who is allowed to judge works he does not know. This is the prelude to Papillon's disclosure of the 'honest artifice' which would grant him many resources. After having uselessly looked for a job as a footman, he relates his occasional meeting with a friend of his, 'a Swiss genius', who advises him to act as a Frenchman: 'You will find all de doors dat was shut in your face as footman Anglois, vil fly open demselves to a French valet de chambre' (11).

Clearly, the old comic device of the disguise is here used to address questions that implicitly touch supposed British national cohesiveness: if, on the one hand, Foote criticises the Francophile attitude of many of his contemporaries (Papillon finds a job *as* Frenchman and for no other reason), on the other, he questions why the valet has to recur to such a stratagem to earn his living.

French culture does not emerge negatively or positively, as what is really discussed by Foote is the British idea/construction of France, evident in the exposition of the frequent French stereotypes on the stage. Papillon says: 'I am

either a teacher of tongues, a friseur, a dentist, or a dancing-master: these, sir, are hereditary professions to Frenchmen' (12). Later, Papillon is introduced by Wilding (to corroborate his lies) alternatively as an enemy and as a friend: 'This gentleman, though a Frenchman and an enemy, I had the fortune to deliver from the Mohawks, whose prisoner he had been for nine years' (19). This quotation presumably refers to the war rhetoric associated with the Seven Years' War, openly referring to French people as antagonist (a rhetoric that was followed by more friendly policies), while the following one evokes the image of a sophisticated and refined French aristocrat, whose acquaintance is considered as an honour: 'This gentleman ... is the Marquis de Chateau Brilliant, of an ancient house in Brittany; who, travelling through England, chose to make Oxford for some time the place of his residence, where I had the happiness of his acquaintance' (27).

From the examples discussed so far one can detect a textual pattern in which theatrical devices, disguise, identity misunderstandings and comical exposition of stereotypes problematise social reality: the interpretative problem of what is and what appears implies the awareness that society is internally stratified and open to influences from the outside (other cultures). From a textual perspective, the play itself seems to tend constantly towards what is beyond the stage, not only through references to living and recognisable characters that delighted the audience, but also through the use of irony and wit which opens language to double and multiple senses, dilating meaning and barring a single interpretation.

This is particularly true in relation to the third focus of discussion, the reference to the Genius, which in *The Liar* is constantly inserted in a parodist texture, associated above all with Wilding's capacity of inventing original lies, an ability which Papillon paints with literary tones: 'You have, Sir, a lively imagination, with a most happy turn for invention. ... this talent of yours is the very soul and spirit of poetry; and why it should not be the same in prose, I can't for my life determine' (13). Or, dresses with ironic disappointment: '... he is as unembarrassed, easy, and fluent, all the time, as if he really believed what he said. Well, to be sure, he is a great master: it is a thousand pities his genius could not be converted to some public service' (14).

If we consider the aesthetics of the time, it may sound hazardous to presume that Foote was brazenly trying to lower the level of the aesthetic debate, but this is what some exchanges suggest:

Wild. Why, Papillon, you have but a poor, narrow, circumscribed genius.

Pap. I must own, Sir, I have not sublimity sufficient to relish the full fire of your Pindaric muse. (23)

Papillon, evoking the sublime and the muse, explicitly brings the seeming versus being theme on a literary level, again with a double purpose: popularising it and subtly laughing at critics' bombast and social attitude *à la mode*.

In conclusion, we can assert that, as an adaptation that reworks an 'original' source making it completely new, *The Liar*, through disguise, parody and ironic detachment, poses serious questions about truth and falseness, being and seeming, and about what, in social and literary terms, can be defined imitation or originality. Playing on the social and literary implications of lying, the play, on the one hand, condemns duplicity and hypocrisy providing an ending that repays the liar with the same coin (he falls victim of his own deceit); on the other, it problematises some aesthetic and cultural issues of the eighteenth century. By ironically suggesting a parallelism between lie and literary (original) creation, Foote challenges originality as an absolute value. At the same time, through the character of Papillon, the drama investigates and represents some aspects connected with the question of British cultural identity, as it stood in the mid-century. Then, the fact that literary originality and cultural identity are central to an adaptation whose purpose was supposed to be pure entertainment, not only shows how these two issues were crucial and deeply interconnected at the time, but also proves the documentary and literary relevance of Foote's text.

This relevance, however, can be fully understood only if framed into the wider cultural context of eighteenth-century drama, in which adaptation went through a sort of rise-and-fall oscillation, affected not only by aesthetic ideals (imitation in the first half of the century and originality in the second one), but also by ideological reasons connected with the nascent imperialist identity of Great Britain. Moreover, adaptation as a practice found itself imbricated with the emergence of a modern authorial figure/status. The shift from *inventio* to invention was possible only because any theory of creation was informed by a definite sense of both literary *property* and *propriety* (cf. MacFarlane 2007, 2-3): the awareness that authors were legally individual owners of their texts intermingled with the more difficult problem of how to deal with the texts of others and so with the tradition. Neoclassicism seemed to have found a solution through the compromise of art as imitation, in which adaptation played a leading role; later (preromantic) theories took the process of privatisation and individualisation of creation to extremes, proposing – or rather imposing – the idea of an imaginatively (and not only legally) Unique Author. This new approach to the idea of authorship was the cause of the depreciation of adaptation in the last decades of the century, a depreciation that, as this article has tried to demonstrate, needs to be reformulated and reconsidered.

¹ In this respect, Dustin Griffin writes: 'The period from 1660 to 1714 witnessed what might be called the birth of the modern English author. For it is during these years that there began to appear many of the features by which we define modern authorship: copyright legislation, widespread identification of the author on the title page, the "author by profession", bookselling as commercial enterprise, a literary "marketplace", the periodical essay and political journalism' (2005, 37). A shorter and differently oriented version of this article was presented

as a paper at the XXV Conference of the Associazione Italiana di Anglistica (AIA), which was held in L'Aquila (15-17 September, 2011).

² For further discussion on Shakespearean adaptations, see Bate (1989), Dobson (1992), Innocenti (2010).

³ For further discussion on the reasons for the decline of drama see Hume (2005), 316-339 and Love (2005), 109-131.

⁴ Robert MacFarlane analyses the terms of the opposition between *inventio* and invention in details (2007, 1-5).

⁵ For further discussion on the philosophical debate developing around the idea of genius, see Franzini (1995, 93-114).

⁶ Even though the Copyright Statute passed in 1710, the idea that the author was the legal proprietor of his/her work was already accepted at the end of the seventeenth century (Griffin 2005, 42-43).

⁷ Kewes also gives other examples: Isaac Bickerstaffe commenting his play *The Sultan, or A Peep into the Seraglio* writes that it 'is taken from Marmontel'; Hannah More specifies that her tragedy *Percy* derives from 'The French Drama, founded on the famous old Story of Raoul de Coucy'; Elizabeth Griffith writes: 'The hint of [*The School for Rakes*] was taken from a much admired performance of Monsieur Beaumarchais, stiled Eugen' (2001, 2).

⁸ Kewes (2001, 10) reads the spectator's speech as influenced by Locke's idea of *tabula rasa*.

⁹ In particular, it is Gerald Newman that considers Foote an 'anti-Gallic' dramatist. See Newman (1987), 71-73.

¹⁰ Foote's adaptations from French are numerous: *The Englishman in Paris* (1753) from De Boissy's *Le Français à Londres* (1727); its sequel *The Englishman returned from Paris* (1756); *The Liar* (1762) from Corneille's *Le Menteur* (1642); *The Devil upon Two Sticks* (1768) from Le Sage's *Le diable boiteux* (1707) and Molière's *Le malade imaginaire* (1673); its sequel *Doctor Last in his Chariot* (1769); *The Commissary* (1765) from Molière's *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* (1679) and d'Ancourt's *La femme d'intrigues* (1692); *The Nabob* (1772) again from d'Ancourt's *Le femme d'intrigues*.

¹¹ Subsequent references to this edition will be given in brackets next to the quotation.

¹² As many critics underline, Foote knew both Steele's *The Lying Lover* (1703) and *The Mistaken Beauty* (1685), the anonymous translation of *Le Menteur* used by Steele as a guide for his adaptation (for a detailed discussion on this topic, see Genest 1832, 649; and Canfield 1904, 119-127). Nonetheless, the differences between *The Liar* and *The Lying Lover* are so substantial that, in my opinion, it is hardly likely that Foote reworked Steele's text; it is more plausible to think that he considered it as a model but did not use it as his direct source. The two adaptations are indeed complementary rather than similar: whereas Steele was interested in keeping all the classical formal elements, and especially a polite, decorous language, conveying an explicit moral lesson for the public, Foote resumed the satirical potential of Corneille's play which Steele had neglected. His dialogues are lively and far from Steele's sentimental tone. Moreover, Steele kept the formal division in 5 acts, keeping the same number of characters, while Foote considerably cut the characters and reduced the play to three acts, making it lighter and more comical, so that the general purpose was not to teach by *telling* right from wrong, but to entertain and *show* the effects of bad behaviour.

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