

## INTRODUCTION

Our fair authoress has entitled it a comedy, but had she as Gay did his *What-do ye-call it*, denominated it a tragic-comedy-operatical-pantomimical farce, it would not have been a misnomer, for it partakes of every one of these.<sup>1</sup>

The law of liberty and wit they seize;  
In tragic-comic-pastoral they dare to please.<sup>2</sup>

The range of Hannah Cowley's (1743–1809) drama is encapsulated in the first epigraph above, from a censorious review of her oriental musical comedy, *A Day in Turkey; or The Russian Slaves* (1791). The review associates this significant eighteenth-century woman dramatist with her distinguished relation, John Gay, and with his challenge to generic hierarchies, by making reference to the subtitle of his 'burlesque of literary hierarchies', *The What D'Ye Call It: A Tragi-Comi-Pastoral-Farce* (1715).<sup>3</sup> Criticizing Cowley's mixing of conventions from different dramatic forms within one play, the words used in the epigraph also focus attention on the innovative nature of some of her work in drama. Cowley's reputation is based on her remarkable success as a comic dramatist, yet her experimentation with a number of dramatic and poetic genres has not been recognized. This book seeks to recover the work of this celebrated eighteenth-century dramatist by demonstrating the use she made of her public voice within a variety of dramatic forms. Barbara Darby writes in her work on Fanny Burney's drama that 'dramatic literary histories have done little to pursue the complex relationship between gender and genre in this period.'<sup>4</sup> This book will attempt to shed some light on the relationship between gender and dramatic genre by examining why Cowley chose particular dramatic genres, how she used them, and how her gender affected her work and her choice of genres.

Cowley's challenge to generic hierarchies, unlike Gay's, was to an extent gendered, for she wrote tragedy when the genre was considered unsuitable for women and she dealt with serious topical issues in shorter miscellaneous theatre forms or afterpieces, which were performed alongside the mainpiece comedy or tragedy as part of the evening's entertainment in the patent theatres. These ephemeral forms have been labelled 'illegitimate' by theatre historians because they were often staged

at the non-licensed theatres where performances of mainpiece comedy and tragedy were forbidden.<sup>5</sup> Some of these forms were used more often by female than male writers because they were commercially attractive but of lower status than five-act comedy and tragedy. Although farce and pantomime were generally avoided by women writers at the end of the eighteenth century because of their association with satire, Cowley attempted these forms with particular success.<sup>6</sup> Yet according to the assessment of her contemporaries and some recent critics, this celebrated and successful mainstream comic playwright appears to have eschewed fame as a dramatist and poet, and to have been conservative and conformist. How is this apparent conventionalism and lack of interest in her profession to be reconciled with her experimentation with genre, her criticism of aspects of the political system, her challenge to prevailing perceptions of women and to confining boundaries, and her raising issues of social inequities in her plays? And what part do the difficulties faced by a woman writing for the theatre in this period play in the contemporary construction and recent assessment of her as conformist and unadventurous?

### Cowley's Experimentation with Diverse Dramatic Genres

Cowley was particularly celebrated for her comedies, with female protagonists firmly at the centre of these plays. Yet, despite her success in this genre, and the financial security this brought to her family, she briefly turned her back on comedy to write tragedy, a venerated but financially risky genre, as well as popular but disparaged 'illegitimate' forms of pantomime, farce and interlude, thereby extending her scope as a dramatist. The *European Magazine* of 1789 noted: 'she has been highly successful in the different walks of Tragedy, Comedy and Farce.'<sup>7</sup> Cowley's depiction in her comedies of assertive heroines striving for autonomy and her engagement in other genres with male political, philosophical and artistic discourses, suggests that a constant thread in her plays is the exclusion of women from artistic, intellectual and political life. Comparisons among her manuscripts, the first printed editions and her posthumous *Works* (1813), and new examinations of the three works which exist only in manuscript – one of them, her pantomime scene *Lady Fashion's Rout* (1779), is here examined for the first time – shed light on the processes of her writing. Alterations between manuscript and printed versions of the plays, and newly discovered letters, provide evidence of how Cowley negotiated the pressures of the commercial theatre and the constraints faced by a woman writer in so public a medium, to use her voice to influence the society in which she lived. For Cowley was making political points about women's rights as well as topical philosophical and political issues in a more popular and accessible medium than the political pamphlet favoured by Mary Wollstonecraft.<sup>8</sup> That Cowley was taking risks by doing so is indicated by the many newspaper reviews which complain about political passages in her works. One critic objected that in her comedy *More Ways than One* (1783), 'the author has also mixed a little of

the present politics ... an interference which familiarity cannot reconcile. It is not the province of the Muse'. And another wrote of her musical comedy, *Turkey*, that 'The play is not without merit in some of its parts, but abounds too much in political allusions'.<sup>9</sup> That she was in a position to use such a significant public medium as drama in London theatre to influence public opinion on political and gender issues is an indication of how far Cowley had travelled in her life, from her modest birth as the daughter of a bookseller in the small Devon town of Tiverton.

### The Life of Hannah Cowley: 'Tracing with Feeble Steps the Borders of the Parnassian Mount'<sup>10</sup>

The few surviving biographical details of Cowley's life have influenced the prevailing critical opinion of her as conservative and conformist in her political views, if more radical in her gender politics. This biographical information comes from the preface to her *Works*, an obituary in the *Gentleman's Magazine* and one or two articles published in her lifetime and soon after her death.<sup>11</sup> In the manner of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century portraits of middle-class women, these sources present a picture of a virtuous domestic woman, defined by her roles as daughter, wife and mother, and having no professional aspirations.<sup>12</sup> Scrutiny of recently unearthed documents, of information about Cowley's place of birth and of the networks she employed to advance her professional career might disturb this image; an image that she was nonetheless not averse to using when it suited her. However, the picture of a housewife and mother who attended the theatre infrequently is belied by evidence from contemporary newspapers that during her period of renown as a dramatist in London she enjoyed a celebrity equal to that of the leaders of *bon ton* society and popular actresses (see Figure I.1). Cowley's movements were reported in the press: 'Mrs Cowley left Paris soon after the commotions began: on her arrival in London she was taken ill, and went directly into Devonshire, where we hope her native air has restored her health'; 'The celebrated Mrs. Cowley is much indisposed, and labouring under the greatest affliction for the loss of her eldest daughter'. The royal family frequently attended the theatre to see her plays: 'Last night their majesties commanded Mrs. Cowley's comedy called the Belle's Stratagem, at the Theatre Royal in Covent-Garden, which was performed to one of the most brilliant and crowded audiences that ever adorned a place of public entertainment'. Her plays could draw an overflowing audience even when the royal family attended a rival theatre. At an early performance at Covent Garden of her *More Ways*, for instance, when their Majesties and Mrs Siddons were an attraction at Drury Lane, Covent Garden was so crowded that an overflow of audience was sent from her performance to Drury Lane. Richard Cosway painted Cowley (see Figure 1.2) and his portrait of her 'protected by the Comic Muse' was exhibited at the Royal Academy in June 1784. The financial success of her first play, *The Runaway* (1776) – £800 received for three nights and the sale of the

publication rights – was later declared ‘a circumstance absolutely unprecedented in dramatic history.’<sup>13</sup> Yet the preface to her posthumously published *Works* states: ‘Neither ... did she take pleasure in viewing, nor was accustomed to be present at, a theatrical representation. She never witnessed a first performance of one of her own plays.’<sup>14</sup> There is much evidence that this is not true. Even the preface states that her first attempt at playwriting followed an evening at the theatre, and there are newspaper reports of her appearance at her own plays. Actress Anna Maria Crouch wrote of a performance of *The Belle’s Stratagem* (1780): ‘Mrs Cowley, upon entering one of the upper boxes during the run of her admired comedy, was perceived by the audience, and hailed with repeated plaudits.’<sup>15</sup> The press reported on another occasion that on her entering the Manager’s box at the first performance of *More Ways*, ‘the house broke into a general plaudit,’ with ‘her name sounding from every part of it.’<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, she was well-informed about contemporary theatre. Her plays include references to other plays and to actors, as was typical at the time, and she wrote parts for particular actors. Cowley herself wrote to Garrick that she had created roles in *Runaway* with particular actors in mind: ‘The Justice owes his existence in this piece to the comic capabilities of Mr Weston, Bella I drew from Mrs Abington, Harriet from Miss Younge.’<sup>17</sup>

# Copyright

The image has been removed for copyright reasons

The image has been removed for copyright reasons

# Copyright

It was in the small agricultural country town of Tiverton, where Cowley was born to Hannah (née Richards) and Philip Parkhouse, that the dramatist made the initial contacts and experienced the education and political influences that would affect and inform her writing. This was a town used to popular political activism. It had experienced the arrival of the Enniskillen Dragoons in 1754, sent to put down demonstrations by people claiming the right to participate in the election of their Mayor.<sup>18</sup> It was also a town where patriotic feelings could be roused, as shown when a young local sailor was celebrated after he died in service. Cowley may have based Asgill in *The Town Before You* (1794) on this young sailor.<sup>19</sup> Linda Colley speaks of 'an officially constructed patriotism which valued military and naval achievement', and the drama of the eighteenth century was populated with patriotic sailors and worthy merchants who contributed to national definition and pride and what historian Kathleen Wilson calls 'the imperial project'.<sup>20</sup>

Cowley's father, to whom she owed so much for education and support in the early stages of her career, was a bookseller and an active and outspoken local politician, so it is likely that Cowley would have been aware of the vagaries of local politics. The family business was located in the centre of Tiverton near the Town House where the Mayor and Corporation met, and the leading inns where much of the unofficial business of the town took place.<sup>21</sup> She was indebted to her father not only for a knowledge of local politics, but also for the education in classics that he gave her, based on his own education at Blundell's School.<sup>22</sup> Cowley's debt to her father is recorded in the dedication of her poem *The Maid of Aragon* (1780):

The tale to you, to you the Bayes belong  
You gave my youthful fancy wings to soar,  
From your indulgence flows my wild-note song.<sup>23</sup>

The family business of bookselling and stationery gave her access to books that would ordinarily have been easily available only to a woman of noble rank. Contemporary bookseller James Lackington observed in his *Memoirs* that female customers 'read the best books in the English language, and many read the best works in various languages; and there are some thousands of ladies, who frequent my shop, that know what books to choose, and are as well acquainted with works of taste and genius, as any gentleman in the kingdom.'<sup>24</sup> Cowley's works reveal, both in references and use of sources, a knowledge ranging from classical literature and rhetoric to French drama and moral tales and English and French philosophical works.

Yet Cowley was also beholden to her father for his patronage that was so helpful in the early stages of her career. Philip Parkhouse wrote to the local Whig Member of Parliament, Lord Harrowby, to plead for assistance in finding work

for his daughter's husband.<sup>25</sup> To this local member of the nobility Cowley was indebted for contacts in London after she had begun playwriting, and a post for her husband Thomas Cowley with the East India Company, to supplement the family income (Hannah appears to have been the principal wage earner in the family until Thomas was offered his post in India).<sup>26</sup> Frequent attendance at the theatre and discussion with her husband would have given Cowley insights into drama that compensated for the practical experience of the theatre that Elizabeth Inchbald and Frances Brooke brought to their work, through acting and theatre management, respectively.

It is probable that she owed to her husband her introduction to the theatre, for he supplemented his income from the Stamp Office when they moved to London with work as a theatre critic and for a time editor of the *Gazeteer*. The particular circumstance of the Cowleys' marriage, despite a separation enforced by financial necessity and his death in India in 1797, was probably a significant factor in Cowley's positive attitude to marriage, and to the relationships between men and women which are at the heart of dramatic comedy. Cowley's eulogy to marriage in her poem *Edwina the Huntress* suggests the importance she attached to the model postulated by Lawrence Stone of supportive companionate marriage of intellectual equals:

Not the cold Compact subtle Interest twines,  
Nor that which pale Submission trembling signs  
Is Marriage! No. – 'Tis when its polish'd chain  
Binds those who in each other's bosom reign!  
'Tis when two Minds form one extactic Whole,  
One sweetly blended wish, one sense, one soul!<sup>27</sup>

If, as feminist critics have noted, she failed to examine divorce, as did her contemporary Elizabeth Inchbald, her own marital circumstances might explain this. Additionally the constraints on women dramatists prevented any discussion of unorthodox relationships. She did, however, portray unhappy marriages in the characters Mr and Mrs Fancourt in *The Town*, and Mr and Mrs Sparwell in *The World as it Goes: or A Party at Montpelier* (1781).<sup>28</sup>

Another influence was her brother-in-law John Cowley. During Thomas's absence in India, Cowley and her children stayed with his brother, who was an eminent merchant living in Cateaton Street. The warm Dedication to him of her tragedy *The Fate of Sparta; or The Rival Kings* (1788), the reference to him in the preface to her *Works*, and a number of portraits and references in her plays suggest that he may have had an influence on her writing and her political opinions.<sup>29</sup> In particular it is likely that John positively affected Cowley's attitude to trade and commerce.

Another contact first made in Tiverton, and one which was significant to the progress of Cowley's career by giving her access to the highest ranking coteries of London *bon ton* and artistic society and to influential figures in Paris during the first year of the Revolution, was the artist Richard Cosway. He was born in Tiverton two years before Cowley, and later his Italian artist wife, Maria, became a friend of Cowley as the latter was achieving renown as a dramatist in London. The Cosways' soirées numbered among their regular guests the Prince of Wales, James Boswell, Horace Walpole and Angelica Kauffmann.<sup>30</sup> Maria wrote a letter of introduction for Cowley to her lover Thomas Jefferson when Cowley visited her own daughters and nieces at their finishing school in 1789 in Paris.<sup>31</sup> Here she found the model for her 'giddy' French revolutionary character, A La Greque, in *Turkey*.<sup>32</sup> While staying at the Hotel de Vendôme, the playwright was 'visited by people of rank and talents', 'writers and composers of the nobility and church'.<sup>33</sup> Such networks put her in touch with political opinion-makers both in London and Paris at this significant time.

If the networks Cowley had developed from her youth in Tiverton and through her own family were to influence her career and the ideas which informed her drama, it was through her own audacity that she made a contact that gave her a start in her career. Anecdotally her career is said to have begun when she decided that she could write as well as the author of a play she had just seen.<sup>34</sup> She sent her first effort, *Runaway*, to David Garrick, manager of the Drury Lane Theatre, along with a supplicating letter in which she apologized for having 'stept out of that province which is prudently assigned to my sex', and he eventually staged the comedy in February 1776, after making several amendments.<sup>35</sup> It had a respectable run, which was surprising for the work of a provincial dramatist who was a woman and a novice, and it marked the beginning of Cowley's successful career as a comic dramatist. Cowley's prologue, which was published in the *St James Review* on 22 February, makes self-effacing references to her sex and lack of knowledge of classical rules, and emphasizes her domestic background:

Our Poet of to-night, in faith's a – Woman  
A woman, too, untutor'd in the School,  
Nor Aristotle knows, nor scarce a rule ...  
For she ne'er play'd with bright Apollo's fire,  
No Muse invok'd, or heard th'Aonian lyre;  
Her Comic Muse – a little blue-ey'd maid  
With cheeks where innocence and health's display'd;<sup>36</sup>

Although the *General Evening Post* and the *Morning Chronicle* remarked on the mystery of the unknown woman dramatist who lacked a patron, their reviews were positive.<sup>37</sup>

Soon afterwards Cowley lost a mentor when Garrick died in 1779. He had praised her in a letter to the dramatist Richard Cumberland as clever, modest and deserving of encouragement.<sup>38</sup> But there is no evidence of support from Cumberland and Cowley had to summon all her own resources to continue her career at this stage. For Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who became part owner of the Drury Lane theatre, was less supportive than Garrick, probably because he was more interested in staging his own comedies. Cowley recorded her difficulties with the manager of the other patent theatre, Thomas Harris, who had a private agreement with Sheridan not to stage a play that he had refused.<sup>39</sup> Neither would stage Cowley's first tragedy *Albina, Countess Raimond* (1779), a very early Gothic drama, while both led her to believe it was worth performing. So she enlisted the help of her patron, Lord Harrowby, and eventually George Colman, manager of the Haymarket Theatre, arranged for performances during the summer season, but not before Cowley had engaged in an unseemly newspaper altercation with Hannah More whom Cowley believed had plagiarized from her *Albina* and was partly responsible for her difficulties in achieving a performance.<sup>40</sup> Cowley accused her rival of plagiarism in her two tragedies, *Percy* (1777) and *The Fatal Falsehood* (1779) both of which were staged by Sheridan.

Putting these difficulties behind her, Cowley wrote her most popular comedy, *Stratagem*. Dedicated to Queen Charlotte, it ran for twenty-eight nights initially, and probably earned Cowley £400, partly from three benefit performances<sup>41</sup> and an additional £100 for delaying publication because of the existence of a 'spuriously' published edition in Dublin.<sup>42</sup> It was eleventh in popularity among the mainpieces performed between 1776 and 1800, and continued in performance until the early twentieth century, partly owing to the attractive role of the heroine, Letitia.<sup>43</sup> The success was followed by four full-length comedies written in as many years, three of which were successfully staged. *Which is the Man* (1782), *A Bold Stroke for a Husband* (1783) and *More Ways* followed hard upon *Stratagem*. Cowley's comedy *The World*, relating the antics of a motley collection of European travellers in the French spa town of Montpellier, was not successful. This was partly due to the play's 'extravagant and vulgar' incidents, and supposedly coarse language. But another cause for the play's failure was the lack of commitment of the actors who were resentful about the short run of the comic opera *The Islanders* by Charles Dibdin, for which they blamed her husband's negative criticism and accusations of plagiarism.<sup>44</sup> Thomas's theatre criticism had already caused Cowley problems in her relationship with author Hannah More. He was accused of puffing his wife's tragedy *Albina*, according to a letter in the *Morning Post* of 8 September 1779, of bribing friends to support *Albina* and of insulting More.<sup>45</sup> The reaction to *The World* was a lesson for Cowley in the acceptable boundaries of taste, and is additional evidence of the

hazards involved for a dramatist in negotiating with managers, actors and ultimately audiences in order to achieve a successful production.

Hannah could not afford another such failure, for the Cowleys had three or four children (according to various sources) and she seems to have supported the family with her earnings as a writer, although Thomas may have contributed more when he moved to India to take up his new post with the East India Company. This occurred some time before 1784, when Cowley dedicated her comedy *More Ways* to him, revealing something of her emotional distress at their situation in her Dedication.<sup>46</sup> He was to die in India in 1797. Cowley was soon to learn the importance for a woman living without the protection of her husband, particularly a woman in the public eye, of guarding her reputation.<sup>47</sup> For in 1787 Cowley commenced a public correspondence in poetry, under the pseudonym Anna Matilda, in the pages of the *World* with the radical poet Robert Merry ('Della Crusca'), who may have influenced Cowley's political outlook and the direction of her professional career. When their identities were uncovered, Cowley and Merry were ridiculed, and an unpleasant attack by Tory William Gifford in his two satirical works, *Baviad* (1791) and *Maviad* (1795), was almost certainly motivated by political animus against Merry.

The satirical attack by Gifford and the related gossip about the occasionally erotic poetic correspondence with Merry may have contributed to Cowley's decision to withdraw from the stage after her comedy *The Town*.<sup>48</sup> She was humiliated by a published report entitled 'The Interview' of a meeting of the young Robert Merry and her middle-aged self at the end of their poetical romance. Charlotte Smith asked her publisher for a copy of this report, and she made a vituperative attack on Cowley in Mrs Manby, a poet who featured in the novels *The Old Manor House* (1793) and *The Wanderings of Warwick* (1794), described as 'a little, ill-made woman' who enjoyed only the company of men and was deluded about her attractions and abilities.<sup>49</sup> The character sketch also draws on the poetical friendship between Cowley and Merry, and makes a pertinent reference to Cowley's determination to attempt new literary genres: 'Having secured, as she believed, the suffrage of the best judges in various modes of composition, she wept, like Alexander, for more worlds to conquer.'<sup>50</sup> It is possible that Smith considered Cowley a rival and a threat as soon as the dramatist started to become known as a poet.<sup>51</sup> The hazards for a female writer attempting to succeed in a professional world dominated by men seem to have contributed to the professional rivalry between Smith and Cowley and, according to Ellen Donkin, also between More and Cowley.<sup>52</sup> It may have been a sense of rivalry that impelled Hester Thrale Piozzi to write negatively about Cowley, despite her own links with the Della Cruscan school of poets: 'She [Cowley] and I never met; I fancy her Vulgar and ill behav'd'. Once again, such remarks may be the result of professional jealousy, for Thrale recorded the success of Cowley's *Sparta* and the

‘fine Epilogue’ spoken by Sarah Siddons, for whom Cowley wrote the principal female role. Thrale reveals her fear that her own epilogue would ‘be compared with hers [Cowley’s] & found inferior.’<sup>53</sup>

If these women have left unpleasant pictures which disturb the image of Cowley both as a virtuous housewife and mother and successful professional dramatist and poet, other contemporaneous women writers recorded their recognition of the value of Cowley’s comedies, including Elizabeth Inchbald, Anna Seward and Jane Austen.<sup>54</sup> No correspondence between Cowley and other women writers survives, which might indicate a supportive network such as existed between Trotter, Pix and Manley in the late seventeenth century.<sup>55</sup> Cowley did, however, leave a poetic tribute to Fanny Burney, and a passage in her poem *The Scottish Village* (1786) praising Burney and woman writers Anna Seward and Anna Laetitia Barbauld.<sup>56</sup>

Surviving correspondence with a book dealer and a publisher, respectively, provides an indication of Cowley’s manipulation of her own professional life, and reveals that she did not passively accept her positioning as virtuous wife, mother and amateur dramatist. She exploited a connection in Paris to have her works translated and made available in France. She enclosed a letter to Monsieur Qu[i]étant, a book dealer and translator, with a package of books relating to her father’s bookselling business, and she continued the correspondence, sending books via a French merchant known to her brother-in-law as well as the unfinished *Maid of Aragon*, which she considered her best work.<sup>57</sup> Her *Stratagem* and *Which is the Man?* were published in Paris in 1784, only two years after the first performance of the latter play.<sup>58</sup> Cowley also corresponded with Richard Phillips, the radical publisher in St Paul’s Cathedral Close, after her retirement to Tiverton, suggesting she would be prepared to join him in editing an annual review.<sup>59</sup>

Cowley carefully maintained her professionalism throughout her career, and showed tenacity and a determination to preserve her artistic integrity. She restored the entire text of *A School for Greybeards: or The Mourning Bride* (1786) in the first printed edition, despite accusations of immorality relating to some passages in the text, and her correspondence with David Garrick and her patron Lord Harrowby shows her carefully expressed wish to retain passages that they recommended she remove from *Runaway* and *Albina* respectively: ‘I cannot help wishing the discovery of the daughter, may be allowed to stand’; ‘You had the goodness to allow, my Lord, that if my feelings should be very strong, against any proposed emendation, that I should be at liberty to accept it, or not – I have sometimes avail’d myself of this license.’<sup>60</sup> She restored passages in *Turkey* which had been omitted at the second night following complaints about their political nature.<sup>61</sup> Cowley asserted her professional right to financial remuneration, for the care and time required to write a play – ‘Dramatic Writers, in particular, have

always sought for support from their labour, which is too great to be undertaken for amusement'.<sup>62</sup> A correspondence between Cowley's patron, Lord Harrowby, and the town clerk, Beavis Wood, a friend of Cowley's father, gives a further indication of the tenacity of their Tiverton celebrity. Beavis Wood spoke of the contempt with which Cowley treated the abuse heaped on her over the problems in having *Albina* staged, and Lord Harrowby regretted that she did not deal more gently with the theatre managers.<sup>63</sup>

Cowley had announced her retirement in the preface to the first edition of the play which concluded her dramatic career, her dark comedy *The Town*. The preface was both a complaint about the state of the contemporary stage and a manifesto of her theory of comedy. She turned to epic poetry, a form she had already used, publishing *The Siege of Acre* in 1801, the year in which she retired to Tiverton.<sup>64</sup> The local history describes Tiverton at that time, with its 'fine bowling-green' at the centre of the town, the adjacent hills and woods frequented by 'lovers of the chace' and the regular assemblies, concerts and card parties during the winter.<sup>65</sup> Cowley continued occasionally to write poetry, socialize with the wealthy families, engage in good works and hold large parties for women once a week at her house.<sup>66</sup> She spent some time revising her works for publication. It was in Tiverton, in a house in Bridge Street, very near the river and near St George's church, that Cowley died in 1809. She was buried in the churchyard of this evangelical church, 'more to her liberal tastes' because 'less rooted in class structure' than the older St Peter's church, where her family had worshipped and where she had been baptized.<sup>67</sup> This final part of Cowley's life had the greatest influence on the biographical material in the complete *Works*, published in 1813, four years after her death. Despite the portrayal of a retiring and religious woman, her reputation as one of the most popular British playwrights of her time remained unaffected and her plays continued to be performed in London, in the provincial theatres in England, Scotland, America and Europe.<sup>68</sup> Three of her comedies continued in performance until the end of the nineteenth century and *Stratagem* was last performed in England in 1913.<sup>69</sup>

### Dramatic Genres

When Cowley began to write plays, an evening at the theatre was long and varied and included a five-act mainpiece comedy or tragedy or a ballad opera, a prologue and epilogue to the mainpiece, theatrical dance and popular music often performed between the acts of the mainpiece, and a lighter two-act afterpiece. The serious, heroic or pathetic drama was interspersed with the comic and trivial. For example, *King Lear* often concluded with a popular dance, the Frolick.<sup>70</sup> Rope dancers, wire dancers, animal performers and popular poetry readings held the attention of noisy audiences.<sup>71</sup>

Identifying eighteenth-century dramatic genres is problematic because of an inconsistent use of terminology in titles, prefaces, newspaper reviews and submissions for licensing. The theatre managers sometimes used the terms 'play', 'entertainment' or 'dramatic poem'.<sup>72</sup> In their attempts to define the principal genres, dramatists could create further confusion. Nicholas Rowe employed the term 'she-tragedy' for his dramas which focused on suffering and victimized women, and in his prefaces Oliver Goldsmith used the terms 'genteel comedy' and 'sentimental comedy' at different times.<sup>73</sup> As genre theorists such as Alastair Fowler and David Duff have argued, generic labels are unstable, change with time, grow out of one another and are used in different ways.<sup>74</sup> Contemporary historians have produced labels and definitions of dramatic forms which further complicate the picture. Twenty-three distinct dramatic forms were identified by Allardyce Nicoll in his work on the late eighteenth-century stage.<sup>75</sup> And while George Winchester Stone declares the impossibility of classifying plays further within the main categories, he devised his own subdivisions of comedy and tragedy, the latter of which differ from Nicoll's categories for tragedies performed between 1750 and 1800: Augustan, domestic, pseudo-Romantic and melodrama.<sup>76</sup> Although neither historian uses the term Gothic, Bertrand Evans and Jeffrey N. Cox have published important anthologies of Gothic drama in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Jane Girdham speaks of the lack of consistent terminology to identify English opera, citing the case of Stephen Storace whose works were given an assortment of designations on playbills, musical scores and other contemporary publications. His afterpieces were called variously 'musical entertainment', 'musical farce' or 'comic opera'. The term 'farce' was sometimes interchangeable with 'afterpiece'. When he was manager at Drury Lane Kemble consistently called the afterpiece 'the farce' and the mainpiece 'the play' in his diaries.<sup>77</sup> And some of the afterpieces classified by Nicoll as interludes are named as farces on the manuscripts submitted to the Lord Chamberlain.

Comedies in the Restoration and early eighteenth century, from Charles II (1660) until the end of Queen Anne's reign (1714), have been subdivided into subgenres of 'comedy of manners', 'comedy of wit', 'political satire', and 'sentimental comedy' or 'comédie larmoyante'.<sup>78</sup> The principle of 'moral utility' was fundamental to the development of sentimental comedy in England.<sup>79</sup> Richard Steele (1672–1729) produced one of the first of the type with *The Conscious Lovers* (1723). He argued in the preface that the effect of going to a play should be 'example and precept', that a broad range of emotions was appropriate to comedy, and that tears could be shed when the ultimate conclusion is happiness.<sup>80</sup> The genre flourished in England in the mid-century, the prominent exponents being William Whitehead (*The School for Lovers*, 1762), Frances Sheridan (*The Discovery*, 1763) and George Colman (*The English Merchant*, 1767). The prevalence of sentimental comedy has engendered much disagreement among critics.

Many claim that it dominated the eighteenth-century stage, whilst others deny this.<sup>81</sup> Robert Hume is particularly critical of the 'laughing' and 'sentimental' dichotomy for which Goldsmith's essay (1773) has been held responsible.<sup>82</sup> Stone suggests that sentimental comedy was not dominant in the third quarter of the century, and that Goldsmith and Sheridan instead 'inherited a thriving comic tradition' which 'continued full blast around them'. Dramatists in this tradition include Arthur Murphy, Samuel Foote, Charles Macklin, George Colman the Elder and David Garrick.<sup>83</sup> These were soon to be joined by Cowley. One newspaper critic praised 'the spirited and sprightly muse of Mrs Cowley, who unites with regular and well conducted fables all the humour, character, and laugh that can be found in the most desultory scenes.'<sup>84</sup> Cowley herself was anxious to disassociate her comedies from sentimental comedy. The preface to her *Works* states: 'The *Comedie Larmoyante* is never found amongst her works'. This was not because she considered the genre of comedy incapable of dealing with serious issues. She was to use comedy to criticize *bon ton* society and aspects of the political system, to engage with serious topical issues and to reflect on her role as a woman artist. It is significant that Cowley associated herself with later Restoration comic dramatists, Congreve, Farquhar and Cibber, and not with sentimental playwrights such as Richard Cumberland, Henry Mackenzie, Hugh Kelly and William Whitehead. In her manifesto on comedy in the preface to her final play *The Town* she despaired of the domination of gesture and spectacle over language, ideas, 'lesson' and 'feeling'.<sup>85</sup> In this critique she allied herself to an extent with Goldsmith, who considered himself an innovator and who praised Congreve in his essay 'On the Present State of Our Theatres'.<sup>86</sup> That her comedies continued in the satirical tradition of Samuel Foote, with a sardonic wit which ridicules human foibles, is suggested by the critic who declared of her last play that 'All the *Peter Pindarisms*, *Mackliniana* ... must be banished.'<sup>87</sup> Peter Pindar, alias John Wolcot, was known for his stinging satires against members of the Royal Academy, and later the King; Macklin for his strong stereotypes.<sup>88</sup>

While comedies far outnumbered tragedies as mainpieces during the period of Cowley's celebrity, two tragedies from earlier in the century remained in the repertory.<sup>89</sup> These two were Joseph Addison's neoclassical *Cato* (1713) and George Lillo's domestic tragedy, *The London Merchant; or The History of George Barnwell* (1731). A popular stock play throughout the century, the latter caught the attention of the important German dramatic theorist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing who was to have so much influence on English drama at the turn of the eighteenth century, when Elizabeth Inchbald and Sheridan adapted August Ferdinand von Kotzebue's melodramas.<sup>90</sup> Shakespeare's tragedies, which broke most of the neoclassical rules, were the dominant stock tragedies in the second half of the century. Yet neoclassical tragedies, and the Aristotelian theories of the unities of time and space upon which they were based, continued to be influ-

ential, if not as dominant as in France. For theories of drama, and in particular tragedy, continued to occupy critics and playwrights. The principal debate was between supporters of Aristotelian tragedy, which predominated in France, and advocates of English Shakespearean tragedy. Elizabeth Montagu challenged French theorists, and in particular Voltaire, in her *Essay on the Writings of the Genius of Shakespeare* (1769). Cowley made her own contribution to this debate and to the theory of poetic justice first discussed by Rapin (translated by Thomas Rymer) and promulgated by Addison and Dennis, in her two tragedies and her published comments on the genre.<sup>91</sup> Cowley chose the French neoclassical genre, with its relatively simple plots and close conformity to the unities, for the second of her tragedies, *Sparta*, which is based on the heroic actions of a Spartan princess who featured in Plutarch's *Lives*. She was developing and continuing the tradition of tragedy of the late seventeenth and earlier eighteenth century, from Nathaniel Lee's Roman play *Lucius Junius Brutus* (1680) to Addison's *Cato* and James Thomson's *Sophonisba* (1730), a tragedy in the tradition of Racine and Corneille, which centres on Queen Sophonisba's conflict between love and loyalty to her country and her lover Masinissa's conflict between love and honour. The role of the heroine in Cowley's play was written for Sarah Siddons, who was renowned for her portrayals of Jane Shore, Lady Jane Grey and Calista, the victimized and suffering heroines of the she-tragedies of Rowe, John Banks and Thomas Otway. The victimized woman had long been familiar in English drama, but the model for these plays was the late Elizabethan and Jacobean drama of sexual intrigue and family honour. Cowley, however, deliberately eschewed the victimization common to she-tragedies, defined by Laura Brown as 'affective tragedy'.<sup>92</sup>

Towards the end of the century evolved the natural successor to the she-tragedy, the new form of Gothic drama. The term 'Gothic' was used by Walpole to classify his novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), and became associated particularly with the novel. It emerged out of a search for a national cultural identity in England's past, as an alternative to the dominance of a rule-based neoclassicism.<sup>93</sup> Another precursor of the Gothic drama was John Home's *Douglas* (1757), based on an old Scottish ballad and spoken in blank verse. It was set in a gloomy and dark landscape, included scenes of violence and extreme pathos, and offered the role of the tragic Lady Randolph which was attractive to Sarah Siddons later in the century.<sup>94</sup> The genre is identified by a number of common characteristics, including its menacing atmosphere, dark secrets, the intent to shock, the breaking of social and sexual taboos, emotional excess and a setting in a remote historical period.<sup>95</sup> The she-tragedies and Gothic drama were both transitional forms, questioning aristocratic courtly values. In both types of drama the victimization of the heroine is central to a newly evolving genre which rejects the

traditional values of high aristocratic tragedy, as represented in the heroic drama of Dryden or in classical Aristotelian tragedy.<sup>96</sup>

At the end of the century, Gothic drama was sometimes conflated with melodrama, the dominant dramatic form of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The term 'melodrama' was first used in 1802, and it replaced such terms as 'mixed drama' and 'musical drama'. Linda Troost notes that the Haymarket Theatre settled on the format which became known as melodrama. The comic was combined with and undermined the serious, and the genre exteriorized conflict, conveying 'complexity, ambiguity and irony' by 'dramatic rather than poetic or literary means'.<sup>97</sup> With roots equally in sentimental comedy and domestic tragedy, it exploited music, mime, comedy and spectacle.<sup>98</sup> The principal roles were designed for actors, with the minor comic roles given to singers. Orchestral music was used to provide atmosphere and choral numbers were composed for the substantial choruses of minor or non-speaking characters that could fill the larger stages. Grand processions, elaborate scenery and lighting that could reach the back of the stage were ingredients of this new genre. George Colman the Younger's *Inkle and Yarico* (1787) is 'a transitional work' that marked the evolution of comic opera into melodrama. His *Surrender of Calais* (1791) is characterized by Charles Beecher Hogan and Linda Troost as melodrama, as is his *Battle of Hexham* (1789), Thomas Morton's *The Children in the Wood* (1793), Monk Lewis's *The Castle Spectre* (1797) and Colman's musical dramas are other early examples of this form.<sup>99</sup>

Cowley was pioneering in the use of this genre that was to become one of the most commercially successful at the Haymarket and Drury Lane theatres in the last decade of the century, and a dominant genre in the nineteenth century. She referred to her oriental musical comedy *Turkey* as a 'mixed drama'. This oriental play with music, labelled a 'comedy' in the first edition, is usually defined as a 'musical comedy' but occasionally called a 'comic opera'.<sup>100</sup> Musical comedy, of which Isaac Bickerstaffe's *Love in a Village* (1762) was the first example, dominated the London stages in the last four decades of the eighteenth century. Although the genre was closer at first to spoken comedy than to opera, music became a more significant component; each act ended with music and the principal actors sang frequently. Dramatist General Burgoyne used the term 'musical comedy' in preference to 'comic opera'. Cowley's play has many elements of melodrama with its villainous eunuch, the imprisonment of the innocent Russian female protagonist, the spectacle and music of the harem scenes, a chorus of female slaves and smaller comic roles given to singers.<sup>101</sup> This harem play also includes a facetious French revolutionary servant who makes topical political comments. In fact, Cowley's comedy is closer to a melodrama in its characteristics than to comic opera, particularly since actors played the principal roles.<sup>102</sup>

An enormous variety of miscellaneous afterpiece dramatic genres were employed in the eighteenth century. Music, dance and spectacle were integral to them. The most popular were pantomime, comic opera, the operatic farce, the burletta and the interlude.<sup>103</sup> The afterpiece, the generic term for miscellaneous short dramatic forms, was an essential part of the whole evening in the theatre, and had, throughout the century, an additional function as a commentary on the mainpiece. For example John Gay's *What D'ye Call It* was paired with the kind of play it parodied, Rowe's *Jane Shore* on 23 February 1715.<sup>104</sup> Among the twenty-seven different genres written by women dramatists between 1660 and 1823 were the interlude, prelude, melodrama, spectacle, historical drama, medley, sacred drama, musical entertainment and drama for juveniles.<sup>105</sup> It was in these minor and 'illegitimate' afterpiece forms that invention was taking place.

Cowley employed three of these afterpiece forms: a farce, a pantomime scene and an interlude. Her farce *Who's the Dupe?* (1779) became one of her most popular works, and she attempted this genre despite the misogynistic comments earlier in the century which associated the genre with women. 'A roughened form of comedy', farce permitted a more aggressive form of satire, and was not popular with women writers later in the century perhaps because of the even greater pressure than existed earlier to preserve a respectable image.<sup>106</sup> Susanna Centlivre, Cowley's distinguished predecessor, wrote three farces early in the century, two of which attacked male targets in public life. Corrupt Tory electioneering was the butt of her *The Humours of Elections* (1715) and a lustful and hypocritical Catholic priest was the target in *A Cure for Cuckoldam; or, The Wife Well Manag'd* (1715).<sup>107</sup> Cowley used the genre for a similar purpose. Borrowing a subplot from Centlivre's tragi-comedy, *The Stolen Heiress* (1703) for her own work, Cowley satirized a male pedant and contributed to contemporary debates about female education.

Another afterpiece or illegitimate genre generally avoided by women writers but attempted by Cowley was pantomime, a hybrid of dance, song and spectacle performed during the Christmas period. Although it suffered low status because of the physical nature of the staging and the association with 'monstrous', twisted, and unnatural theatre, this genre was at the heart of theatrical innovation.<sup>108</sup> Spectacles on the historical themes of Joan of Arc or Mary Queen of Scots, *Arabian Nights* stories, or even recent novels such as *Robinson Crusoe* featured in pantomimes.<sup>109</sup> The *commedia dell'arte* tradition continued to play an important part in pantomime as it had from the emergence of the form in the 1720s, and Cowley introduced Harlequin and Colombine into her scene of a fashionable London 'rout' as outsider innocents who expose the corruption in *bon ton* society.<sup>110</sup> Cowley contributed a satirical scene, *Lady Fashion's Rout*, to Charles Dibdin's innovative new speaking pantomime, *The Touchstone, or Harlequin Traveller* (1779). Her scene attacked the upper-class contempt towards

marriage. Garrick had done so in his popular afterpiece, *Bon Ton* (1775), but he was an important and established figure in the theatre and in London society; following his lead was a bold move for a newly emerging female dramatist.

The third afterpiece form attempted by Cowley was the interlude. It was similar in nature to the short form, the prelude, which was often designed for the opening of a new theatre or a season, and commented in a humorous way on the current state of the theatre. An interlude was an 'episode' of a semi-farcical nature, often in musical form, such as S[amuel] Birch's *The Packet Boat* (1794), set in a hotel at 'an English harbour', and Garrick's *Lincó's Travels* (1767), a short piece performed between *Cymbeline* and Colman's farce, *The Deuce is in Him*, on 6 April 1767. Garrick's work has no plot; it satirizes Frenchmen, Italians and Germans and attack the familiar target of the Englishman returned from the grand tour, unable to fit into English society because of the affectations he has acquired abroad.<sup>111</sup> Cowley's interlude, *The School of Eloquence* (1780), follows Garrick in its satire of national types, its principal characters being a 'Scotchman', 'Welchman', 'Irishman' and 'Frenchman'.<sup>112</sup> Like James Cobb's interlude *Kensington Gardens, or The Walking Jockey* (1781), Cowley focuses on matters of topical interest in a contemporary setting with the minimum of plot; her interlude lampoons the fashion for debating societies and draws attention to press coverage of the new female debating societies.

### Gender and Genre

Women authors were a marked presence in certain genres by 1800: books of household management, conduct books, schoolbooks and religious works, although not sermons.<sup>113</sup> While 97 women wrote plays between 1660 and 1800, at least 201 women wrote novels and 263 women published poetry.<sup>114</sup> During the eighteenth century journalism and translation, which were poorly paid, became open to women.<sup>115</sup> The novel was a relatively new form 'without a long history of male authorities'.<sup>116</sup> The choice of genre depended upon writers' material circumstances and was also influenced by pressures to conform to notions of appropriate female behaviour. As the growing numbers of women writers were contributing to new genres of writing, they were also indirectly responsible for new hierarchies among forms of writing.

The relationship between genres – 'hierarchical, competitive, combinatory' – is 'a recurrent theme' in critical work on genres.<sup>117</sup> Gender became a factor in determining hierarchies, for women writers tended to employ marginal and non-canonical genres. 'Exclusionist practices' have been held responsible for this; such practices 'obliged women to avail themselves of genres deemed marginal to an androcentric culture, and therefore non-canonical in status'.<sup>118</sup> If, as Olwen Hufton has observed, the contribution of women to 'serious history, phi-

osophy, classical studies or theology was relatively slender, this was partly to do with the inferior education received by women, lacking as it did the classical subjects central to the education given to men.<sup>119</sup> Another barrier was the fact that history and philosophy were not considered suitable subjects for women. Mary Wollstonecraft and Catherine Macaulay, two of the few women to write philosophical history, 'confronted the barriers of a gendered genre directly'.<sup>120</sup> In his rigid definition of history proper, Scottish Enlightenment historian Hugh Blair distinguished it from 'inferior kinds of history; annals, memoirs, biographies', the very genres that women were more likely to employ.<sup>121</sup> Shaftesbury expressed the view that women cannot appreciate history, which 'demands an understanding of public virtue, an ability to generalize, and "an acquaintance with the grand outline of human nature" which is denied to women'.<sup>122</sup> Joshua Reynolds, founding director of the Royal Academy of Arts who was keen to promote a national school of painting, also considered that women did not have 'the ability to abstract and to paint, write or appreciate history', and were thus excluded from 'the republic of taste' and of 'liberal artists'.<sup>123</sup> A hierarchy of genres existed in painting, and history paintings in the 'great style', works which were influenced by and modelled upon ancient Greek and Roman art, were hung above portraits based on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italian art in the annual exhibitions. Lower in the scale of values were Dutch cabinet pictures, landscape, domestic scenes or portraiture, which are more detailed in their imitation of life and were more likely to be the work of women artists. Angellica Kaufman was an exception as her work included history paintings.

### Gender and Dramatic Genres: A Hierarchy

Tragedy long continued to be regarded as superior to other dramatic forms. It was a genre with classical antecedents and associated with masculine values of honour and physical prowess, with kingship, affairs of state and conflicts between states. Even within the genre of tragedy, heroic classical tragedy in verse, with a noble or royal figure moving towards inevitable death, was more highly regarded than tragedy of pathos with women or lower-class characters at the centre. Twentieth-century critics have perpetuated this view.<sup>124</sup> Yet the statistics of performances in the two patent theatres and the Haymarket, reproduced in the *London Stage*, indicate that it was financially unwise for any dramatist to write tragedy in the last three decades of the eighteenth century, for the number of tragedies performed was significantly less than of all other forms.

Furthermore, there existed a critical perception that women should not attempt this genre of high canonical status. It was thought that they lacked the education to write drama which conformed to Aristotelian rules, in particular neoclassical tragedy. Between 1660 and 1800, 585 tragedies were written by

men, compared to fifty by women.<sup>125</sup> The first woman dramatist in the early modern period, Margaret Cavendish, had claimed not to understand the ancient rules of drama; Sarah Mendelson argues that this was a 'rhetorical ploy' and in fact Cavendish deliberately flouted rules because she refused to be 'constrained by their artificial limitations'.<sup>126</sup> As late as 1815, however, Byron could maintain that 'Women (saving Joanna Baillie) cannot write tragedy'. He quoted Voltaire, eighteenth-century dramatist and philosopher: 'the composition of a tragedy requires *testicles*'.<sup>127</sup> Patronizing comments by drama critics and theatre historians as well as by male writers who provided prologues and epilogues to the plays of female dramatists are testimony to the pressure on women playwrights of the eighteenth century to eschew tragedy. Theatre historian Charles Dibdin reflected a commonly held attitude when he wrote that Susanna Centlivre's *The Cruel Gift* was a tragedy, and therefore too ponderous a subject for so feeble a pen.<sup>128</sup> Sheridan's ironical epilogue to More's *The Fatal Falsehood* also reflects this attitude, while apparently endorsing More's work:

Yet, shall a woman tempt the tragic scene?  
And dare – but hold – I must repress my spleen:  
I see your hearts are pledg'd to her applause.<sup>129</sup>

There were also plays satirizing a female dramatist: Susanna Centlivre was thought to be the model for Phoebe Clinket, the mad poetess in *Three Hours after Marriage* (1717) by Gay, Alexander Pope and Dr John Arbuthnot, and Mary Pix, Delariviere Manley and Catherine Trotter were satirized in the anonymous burlesque *The Female Wits; or, The Triumvirate of Poets at Rehearsal* (1697).<sup>130</sup> In George Colman the Younger's satirical farce *The Female Dramatist* (1782), the dramatist is portrayed as a prolific writer with a taste for bloodthirsty plots, who neglects her person and her domestic responsibilities. His satire may even have been aimed specifically at Cowley. Her tragedy *Albina* was produced just before Colman composed his play and she had just published her long preface to *Albina*, in which she described her difficulties in persuading the theatre managers to stage her tragedy. Mrs Metaphor, the 'female dramatist' of Colman's play, complains that 'the taste of the age is so deprav'd that the managers of the play-houses have refused my best dramatic productions'.<sup>131</sup>

Female dramatists throughout the century helped to maintain gendered perceptions of generic hierarchy by apologizing in prefaces for attempting the superior genre of tragedy. They were anxious to emphasize the domestic nature of their tragedies and their employment of the 'softer passions', or their avoidance of classical themes, 'high heroics' or 'war'. Catherine Trotter, writing at the beginning of the eighteenth century, had professed herself apologetic in her dedication, that the 'Subject' of her *The Unhappy Penitent* (1701) was 'only the misfortune of Lovers'. Hannah More, in the latter part of the century, per-

petuated the idea that classic and heroic themes of war and kingship were the province of male writers in her prologue to *The Fatal Falsehood*.

The Licensing Act of 1737 had a significant effect on the status of all dramatic genres and on playwriting by women. It limited the production of 'legitimate' mainpiece or spoken drama to the two principal London Theatres Royal, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, known as the patent houses, and required that all play texts be censored by the Lord Chamberlain.<sup>132</sup> This considerably reduced the number of new plays performed on the London stage and had a particularly bad effect on women dramatists. When Thomas Betterton had started a second theatre company in 1695 at Lincoln's Inn Fields, and created there a sudden demand for new plays, women had had more opportunities to have their works staged.<sup>133</sup> As a result, Mary Pix, Catherine Trotter and Delariviere Manley had successful careers as dramatists at the turn of the seventeenth century, as later did Susanna Centlivre. The opportunities for dramatists between 1776 and 1800, however, were restricted, as only ten new pieces were produced each season at Drury Lane, fifteen at Covent Garden and six at the Haymarket. All other works performed were revivals of stock plays. Many more new afterpieces were performed than mainpieces and there is evidence that women were pressurized into writing afterpieces.<sup>134</sup> Dramatists Sarah Gardner and Sophia Lee, for example, were strongly encouraged by theatre managers to write afterpieces.<sup>135</sup>

These shorter forms, however, lacked the cultural status of mainpiece comedy and tragedy. The 1737 Licensing Act took the form of an amendment to a vagrancy law, and it made a significant contribution to the low cultural standing of the shorter theatrical forms by associating them with 'beggars and vagrants'.<sup>136</sup> These alternative forms flourished later in the century, with a variety of labels but a consistently low status – branded 'garnish ... the mere lace and fringe of the theatre' by George Colman.<sup>137</sup> Yet, while the evidence that women were writing many of these forms suggests 'their need to write on demand for production and publication', Judith Stanton suggests this constraint nonetheless gave the opportunity of freedom to experiment.<sup>138</sup> Farce, the most common of these afterpiece forms, had been identified by Aphra Behn in 1678 with female playwriting free from 'method and rule' when she counter-attacked male critics who had vilified her work:<sup>139</sup>

Your way of writing's out of fashion grown  
 Method and rule – you only understand  
 Pursue that way of fooling and be damned.  
 Your learned Cant of Action, Time and Place,  
 Must all give way to the unlabour'd Farce.<sup>140</sup>

Cowley made an ironic reference to the assumption of a woman writer's ignorance of the classical rules of poetry and drama in her prologue to *Runaway*: 'A woman, too, untutor'd in the School, / Nor Aristotle knows, nor scarce a rule'.

### The Dramatist's Chains

Why did so few women choose to write plays rather than novels, and why of the plays written by women were many more published than performed?<sup>141</sup> Both Cowley and her contemporary, the dramatist and novelist Elizabeth Inchbald, complained of limitations on their creative freedom as dramatists, which they argued was greater than the restrictions faced by novelists. Inchbald compared the respective freedoms of the novelist and the dramatist:

The Novelist is a free agent. He lives in a land of liberty, whilst the Dramatic writer exists but under a despotic government ... a dramatist must not speak of national concerns ... the novel writer has the whole world to range, in search of men and topics.

As much as uncooperative actors and the Licensing Act she blamed audiences, who like to see plays with which they were familiar; thus, the dramatist 'must please at first sight, or never be seen more'.<sup>142</sup> Cowley too compared the novelist's comparative freedom with her own confined situation:

The Novelist may use the boldest tints: – seizing Nature for her guide, she may dart through every rank of society, drag forth not only the accomplished, but the ignorant, the coarse, and the vulgar-rich; ... I, on the contrary, feel encompassed with chains when I write, which check me in my happiest flights, and force me continually to reflect, not, whether this is just? but, whether this is safe?<sup>143</sup>

What were these 'chains' of which Cowley complained? While she gendered the novelist and playwright in her protest, some of the pressures faced by dramatists apply regardless of gender. As noted above, the Licensing Act of 1737 restricted the number of playhouses and thus the opportunities for new playwrights, as managers played safe by using tried and tested material. In addition, pampered and riotous audiences could destroy a play before it had completed one performance. Audiences were uninhibited, hissing, catcalling, laughing immoderately and applauding whenever they wished to express approval. The occupants of boxes would come and go as they pleased, noisily opening and closing doors; feuds could break out and the spectators in the 'gods' would frequently throw orange peel and sometimes more dangerous items into the pit or onto the stage.<sup>144</sup> Critics had not the power to close a play, but their standards reflected society's expectations of drama. These affected women more than men, because of the pressure to maintain a respectable feminine image. Gentility and refinement were prized, as was probability or naturalness. Avoidance of the bawdy, of vulgar or 'low' characters was expected, and characters and actions were required

to be morally exemplary. Wit was not expected to challenge standards of propriety.<sup>145</sup>

Ellen Donkin's exploration of these difficulties faced by a number of women dramatists at the end of the century led her to conclude that diffidence had to be dispensed with for effective communication with managers, prompters and actors. A dramatist had to desire the applause and admiration she would receive from a successful production, or be prepared to face abuse from an unsuccessful one.<sup>146</sup> The woman playwright might have had to be available in the green room of the theatre during the rehearsal period and afterwards, to make corrections, communicate with the theatre staff and anticipate difficulties with actors. For instance, Inchbald's diary entries for the days when she was rehearsing in Cowley's *Stratagem* indicate that Cowley attended rehearsals.<sup>147</sup> This collaborative rehearsal process and the street visibility of the playwright on hoardings and in theatre advertisements was not consistent with the requirement for a woman to maintain an image of modesty and respectability.

Often men closed ranks against a female dramatist because, with her control of the public imaginative world on stage, the female playwright was a far greater threat than the novelist to the masculine dominance of 'public cultural creation'.<sup>148</sup> Ellen Donkin refers to a 'network of influence and connections' that excluded dramatist Frances Brooke when the dramatist presented her first play, *Virginia* (1753), and Isobel Grundy recounts the difficulties actor Sarah Gardner encountered with George Colman, manager of the Haymarket Theatre, and his actors when she attempted to have her first play staged. Similar difficulties with theatre managers in achieving performances of their plays are recounted by Cowley and Sophia Lee. The supplicating relationship with theatre managers, with the exception of Garrick, exposed women dramatists to the additional hazard of sexual harassment.<sup>149</sup> When they achieved performances of their plays, female dramatists were more likely to be accused of plagiarism. Cowley was criticized by theatre historian Rev. John Genest for borrowing from Behn for her *Greybeards* and concealing the fact, while John Philip Kemble was praised for his adaptation of Behn's *The Rover as Love in Many Masks*, 1790.<sup>150</sup> As a result of these obstacles, female dramatists had to adopt a number of strategies, which included a denial of the extent of their education or professional ambition.

### Generic Variety of Cowley's Drama: Her Challenge to Gendered Boundaries

If Cowley sometimes assumes a mask of the amateur, unlike More and Trotter she makes no apologies for transgressing gender boundaries in her choice of genres. She did write in several dramatic genres, both legitimate and 'illegitimate', defying to some extent both commercial and social pressures, and later she used

poetic genres seldom employed by women writers. She vaunts the 'loftiness' of her tragedies, she believed that her first tragedy was innovative and she was very concerned that the originality of her Gothic drama *Albina* had gone unrecognized.<sup>151</sup>

So much was said of Chivalry, and of expeditions to the Holy Land – circumstances which, though finely calculated for the Stage, had been much neglected by our Poets, in favour of the tales of Greek and Roman antiquity ... I could only consider my being in some measure anticipated as unfortunate<sup>152</sup>

Cowley's unhappiness at being 'anticipated' refers to the staging of More's *Percy*, *The Fatal Falsehood* and Robert Jephson's *Law of Lombardy* (1779); *Albina* was finally given an unsatisfactory production at Colman's summer theatre of the Haymarket in 1779.

Another of Cowley's experiments with genre, mentioned in the preface to *Albina*, is the new 'speaking' pantomime for which she contributed an unusual and biting satirical scene.

In the mean-time, the speaking Pantomime of the *Touchstone* was brought out; and, as I was then in great good-humour with Mr. *Harris*, I had a pleasure in endeavouring to suggest some useful alterations, and was happy when he accepted the new scene of *Lady Fashion's Rout*<sup>153</sup>

Cowley was confident too that her idea for the mixed musical comedy *Turkey* was original:

I had indeed made some progress in writing a Piece founded on Turkish manners, the Scene of which is laid in Asia, and flattered myself with success from the novelty of the attempt<sup>154</sup>

The prologue to that play had noted her 'bold imagination' being 'fired / When battle with its horrid train retired'.

Her contribution to the evolution of various genres was consistent with her belief in the value of dialogue in drama, above gesture and spectacle. When the theatre finally failed her, demanding slapstick comedy and melodrama which depended on spectacle and new technical contraptions to please audiences, and which eschewed any serious reflection, she abandoned drama to concentrate on epic poetry, a genre which would give her a voice in national and public issues of war and political upheaval. Cowley had already experimented with this poetic genre in the unfinished epic poem *The Maid of Aragon* (1780). A review in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of her final epic poem *The Siege of Acre* praises the unusual nature of female achievement in this genre which deals with the historic and heroic, observing 'the clearness with which a female mind comprehends the

relationship between our modern implements of war and those used by the conquerors of Persia and Babylon'.<sup>155</sup>

Cowley's 'mainstream reputation' has been attributed to her failure to 'remake some of the conventions of masculine drama from a female point of view'. She has been compared unfavourably with Sarah Gardner, for example, whose failure to achieve many performances denied her the public voice Cowley earned and manipulated.<sup>156</sup> Commercial success, it has been argued, is incompatible with a challenge to boundaries of gender and genre. Such a construction compounds the pattern so detrimental to women writers, as Jane Spencer has argued, in which commercial and aesthetic values become polarized. Commercial success is thus undervalued while literary status, bound up as it was with honours and position, and generally unavailable to women, came to be valued.<sup>157</sup>

### A Conventional Dramatist?

Despite Cowley's celebrity as a dramatist in London and the success of her plays in theatre circuits throughout the country, *Public Characters*, a biographical directory of the time, emphasizes Cowley's domestic roles and virtues at the expense of her professional achievements.

In the different characters of daughter, wife, and mother, the conduct of our fair author has been most exemplary. There is nothing about her that indicates the writer; her manners are lively and unassuming. The general tenor of her life has been by no means theatrical; at the Playhouses she is very seldom seen; and her life has been so strictly domestic, with no intercourse with the Theatres beyond what was necessary for the production of her Plays; for to be public as a GENIUS, and private as a WOMAN, is to wear laurels gracefully veiled.<sup>158</sup>

The image portrayed is of a conservative and conformist woman, although she was frequently criticized in the press for the intrusion of politics in her plays. This book will show that Cowley was radical in her gender politics, prepared to criticize the political system, to raise issues of inequities in society and to combat confining perceptions of women. The fact that some critics today have categorized her as politically conservative and reactionary can be explained partly by the necessity for a woman to appear to conform to the eighteenth-century norms of femininity. In the final decades of the eighteenth century professional female writers needed to manage the conflict between maintaining an image of respectability and femininity, and being involved in work for the theatre. The restrictions on a woman dramatist were due to lingering associations of the green room with strolling players and prostitutes, and to the choice of a public form of art when women were experiencing strong social pressures to conform to bourgeois notions of femininity.<sup>159</sup>

'Chauvinism' or excessive patriotism is another derogatory term applied to Cowley by contemporary critics. Yet to express patriotism was the only way for most women to claim a political voice. Linda Colley argues that being patriotic gave women political identity.<sup>160</sup> Furthermore theatre audiences required a scattering of patriotic outbursts in their plays, and Cowley was not alone in her use of patriotic outbursts to please a volatile audience. Arthur Murphy's *The Citizen* (1761) ends with the declaration 'May Britain's thunder on her foes be hurled';<sup>161</sup> and the pantomime *Harlequin Junior* (1784) concludes with the words 'May British valour, and British loyalty, ever afford glorious scenes for the English theatres!'<sup>162</sup> After all, this was the century in which Arne's *Rule Britannia* was composed for *Alfred* (1740) and the national anthem would be performed at a royal command performance at one of the patent theatres – up to eight times in one evening when George III and his family were present.<sup>163</sup>

The ending to Cowley's most successful play, *Stratagem*, an appeal to the patriotic emotions of the audience, is used as evidence of Cowley's chauvinism. The hero, Doricourt, who had favoured the European women he met on the grand tour above the English woman to whom he was betrothed, now proclaims that British women are superior to foreign women. Cowley's original ending was less nationalistic than the one that appears in the first printed edition, and the additions were almost certainly made by Thomas Harris, the manager of Covent Garden Theatre.<sup>164</sup> The lines in the manuscript version, 'cursed be the hour ... in which British Ladies are polished out of their reserve', was altered for the first edition, and presumably for performance, to 'in which *British* Ladies shall sacrifice to *foreign Graces* the Grace of Modesty!'<sup>165</sup> Two particularly patriotic passages spoken by Doricourt were not in Cowley's manuscript but added to the acting copy as 'sentiments' or 'trap-claps', 'intended, like a patriotic toast at a dinner, to be greeted with a round of applause'.<sup>166</sup> Something similar may also be the case with *The Town*, in which Lady Horatia's eulogy to 'BRITAIN'S CONSTITUTION' and Asgill's patriotic address to the audience, including the capitalized 'ENGLAND MUST BE MISTRESS OF THE GLOBE!', were not in the manuscript but added in the first printed edition.

Through such appeals to national identity, Cowley depicted women characters who claimed a share in male rights of 'liberty, independence and self-determination'.<sup>167</sup> She herself covertly claimed those rights with her play's political critique. She exposes with vitriolic satire a number of unprincipled members of the nobility, including Lord Sparkle in *Which is the Man* and Lady Dinah in *Runaway*. She shows the importance of integrity in political life as well as society in general, and there are a number of references to corruption in the electoral system and among members of Parliament in, for example, the brief exchanges between the mountebank and the mask during the masquerade scene in *Stratagem* (IV.i.49;53), and in the servant Bronze's remarks about brib-

ery at Westminster in his brief soliloquy at the end of *The World*.<sup>168</sup> In *Sparta*, unscrupulous behaviour among the ruling classes is condemned by Cowley's courageous heroine, Chelonice, daughter of the King, when she warns her son to learn

the art to scorn  
A vulgar act, though cloath'd in ermin'd robes,  
Or sweeping the proud train of distant state! (V.iii.82).

The intrepid heroine implies that senior figures of the government, judiciary and even the church are as capable of reprehensible acts as any man, and that these should be severely censured. This sentiment accords with an oppositionist view of politics and patriotism as found in the newspaper and periodical press, and an 'activist conception of citizenship', described by Kathleen Wilson, that rulers should be subject to scrutiny.<sup>169</sup>

No writer could remain completely immune to the events in France and the political reactions in Britain. Cowley's response to the French Revolution is complex and contradictory. A significant passage deleted from the manuscript of *Turkey* reads: 'at least they [the French] have made themselves free, and all the Nations of the Earth shall bless them for it.'<sup>170</sup> (*Turkey* MS, V.i.59). There is further evidence to correct a current critical view that Cowley was politically conservative. She maintained correspondences with two radical acquaintances, which suggests some sympathy, if not complete agreement, with their political views. She pays tribute to her correspondent, the radical poet Robert Merry, by using lines of his in the prologue to *Turkey*. A more serious professional and private correspondence took place with the radical publisher, Richard Phillips, who was imprisoned in 1793 for selling Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*. She discussed the possibility of writing for him, probably for his newly-founded *Monthly Magazine*, which she refers to as 'M.M', and which included Godwin and Holcroft among the early contributors.<sup>171</sup> She subscribed to the *Historical Memoirs of Tiverton* (1790) of Martin Dunsford, a radical local politician who attempted to reform the restricted voting system in the rotten boroughs.<sup>172</sup> Other influential men in her life were Whigs; she was a beneficiary of patronage from the Whig Member of Parliament for Tiverton, Nathaniel Ryder, first Baron Harrowby, and her husband wrote for a Whig newspaper. It has been suggested that Sheridan's reluctance to stage Cowley's plays may have been due to ideological differences, because as a Whig he 'vociferously opposed the war against the American colonies, which Cowley endorsed'.<sup>173</sup> But Cowley would probably not have made known strong political feelings at an early stage in her career, to the detriment of her professional work. Sheridan was notorious for not answering letters, his general unreliability is noted by his sister Betsy, and his disinclination to stage Cowley's plays was more likely to be due to professional rivalry and the nega-

tive commercial implications of putting on a tragedy, particularly by a woman dramatist not yet well established.<sup>174</sup> The general difficulty for any dramatist, and particularly for a woman, to achieve performances has already been noted.

Cowley hid behind the construction of a virtuous, domestic and unintellectual woman because of the social prohibitions female playwrights had to negotiate in their public writing and the practical issues of dealing with managers and actors in backstage collaborations. The existence of very different moral attitudes toward and expectations of women in Cowley's time may have prevented the later dramatist from acknowledging her use of the morally censurable Aphra Behn as a source for *Greybeards*. Although Cowley's failure to recommend alternative forms of relationship to marriage as recipes for a fulfilling life is cited as an indication of her conventionality, her idea of marriage is complicated. She balanced a discourse of rights, argues Misty Anderson, with aspects of 'duty and familial obligation', as enshrined in the conservative marriage law of the time.<sup>175</sup> In other words, while her plays reveal inequities in the legal and social status of women, they are equally concerned with satisfying emotional and physical relationships within marriage and the iniquity of enforced marriage. Furthermore, in her play *The Town* she portrays a female artistic community in which there is strong attraction between the women. There are also erotic lesbian undertones in *Bold Stroke* in the wooing by a cross-dressed woman of another woman, a device adapted from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. And Cowley refers obliquely to lesbianism in her unpublished play, *The World*, when the satirized female connoisseur, Mrs Sparwell, bids a wistful farewell to her fantasy of a 'Bath Weston'.<sup>176</sup> The reference is to Bath-Easton, where Sarah Scott lived with Lady Barbara Montagu, following the breakdown of her marriage amidst gossip about her lesbianism. The failure of this play gave Cowley a clear indication of what was acceptable on stage from a female pen – and any mention of unorthodox relationships was not.

### Cowley's Progress

There is no obvious progression or trajectory to Cowley's career as a dramatist. Rather, the self-fashioning which culminates with a portrayal of a woman sculptor as creative artist and connoisseur in her final play, *The Town*, is achieved through intermittent experimentation with a range of genres and a variety of themes which foreground exclusions of women from artistic, intellectual and public political areas of life. A workman-like dramatist, she was sometimes writing three different plays and genres simultaneously, but always using opportunities as they arose to achieve the performances upon which depended her family's financial survival.<sup>177</sup> This book attempts a snapshot of Cowley's development as a dramatist through generic experimentation. The chapters are arranged

in a way which, while recognizing the random nature of her working pattern, takes account of both chronological and generic development. Throughout the book Cowley's working methods and her conceptions of each play are illuminated by material from manuscript, performance and printed editions. While Cowley generally received favourable reviews she was criticized for the length of some of her scenes. A few days later the same critics commended her for her cuts, indicating the professional way in which she learnt her art and craft through practical experience.

Since Cowley achieved her reputation and commercial success with comedy, Chapter 1 examines her employment and testing of the genre, the most popular one at the patent theatres when Cowley was writing and also the form most used by women. The chapter examines how Cowley exploits comedy's possibilities to introduce questions of gender, using women characters to highlight issues of women's agency. It explores how the traditional ending in marriage is adapted to consider the possibilities of a companionate and erotic relationship of intellectual equals. It notes how Cowley manipulates and occasionally disrupts the genre's traditional structure of misrule and revel followed by order and closure in marriage. She employs elements of the carnivalesque and cross-dressing to scrutinize gender boundaries, social class and *bon ton* society. And she tests the genre by using it to criticize aspects of the political system. The chapter attempts to respond to the critical standard that equates commercial success with feminist and artistic failure. Cowley's own reflections on the genre are examined as is her negotiation of the conflict inherent in being professionally successful in the theatre while maintaining a respectable reputation as a woman.

Subsequent chapters examine Cowley's testing of a range of dramatic genres, beginning with the newly evolving Gothic drama in *Albina* and the elevated neoclassical tragedy in *Sparta*. Her Gothic drama is found to be a pioneering example of its type, in its pseudo-medieval subject matter, its portrayal of an anguished and weak aristocratic villain and the poetic justice of its final gruesome ending. Chapter 2 examines Cowley's disruption in *Albina* of the gendered nature of the discourse of aesthetics, and in particular the sublime as theorized in Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), noting the relationship between the theories of the sublime and the passions depicted in dramatic tragedy. Focus is directed on the two contrasting female protagonists, familiar character foils but with new attributes, and the innovative weak male villain. Cowley again placed a woman – a villainess – at the centre of the play, motivated by overweening ambition and orchestrating the plot. *Albina*, the virtuous heroine, presages many of Ann Radcliffe's heroines in the symbolism of her name and in the self-control she shows in the face of overwhelming vicissitudes, and Gondibert's character has elements of many a future introspective Romantic anti-hero.

Cowley wrote another central female role in her later neoclassical tragedy, *Sparta*, straying from her source in Plutarch to portray a woman who intervened in the political sphere, as had the Duchess of Devonshire, to whom Cowley refers in her prologue. Where Cowley's heroine, Chelonice, is found to exhibit the qualities of civic virtue, Georgiana's damaged reputation impeded her ability to use her political influence to much effect. Chapter 3 examines Cowley's treatment in this play of the topical and elevated themes of kingship, tyranny and the fall of empires. It also explores the balance of sensibility and intrepidity in the actions of Chelonice and her husband Cleombrotus, the rightful king, in the light of the late eighteenth-century view of civic humanism and the related discourses of luxury and slavery. Cowley is found to stake a claim to a political identity for women through Chelonice's courage and patriotism.

If *Sparta* found Cowley claiming political identity for her female protagonist, her illegitimate plays are analysed as drawing attention to women's lack of a voice in politics, law and religion, partly because of their exclusion from the education given to men. In her interlude and pantomime scenes, *The School of Eloquence* (1780) and *Lady Fashion's Rout* from *The Touchstone* (1779), Chapter 4 finds Cowley commenting on the topical institutions of the debating society and public speaking, and on upper-class society and fashion. Her preoccupation with language is shown in her engagement with rhetoric in her interlude, and her debunking of pretension to knowledge of scholarly languages and her exposure of women's exclusion from classical languages in her farce *Dupe*. This genre permitted a more aggressive satire of society and more flagrant exposure of such inequities as the inferior education of women than mainpiece comedy would allow.

Chapter 5 examines Cowley's oriental musical comedy, an early example of melodrama, for its challenge to what historian Kathleen Wilson defines as the imperial project, at a time of the reconceptualization of empire. Despite her apparent disassociation from Mary Wollstonecraft and her denial of political content in the play, Cowley uses this newly evolving popular genre to explore the possibility of a wider access to citizenship by voicing radical issues of equality and liberty. She thus indirectly challenges the masculine model of the patriot citizen. Cowley's hybrid musical drama, *Turkey*, enabled her to extend the world of theatre and treat contemporary political issues, patriotism and imperialism under the guise of an oriental tale, employing a technique of self-parody by juxtaposing the sentimental and farcical. The chapter sheds light on the inconsistencies and contradictions in this play which mixes parody with the sentimental, and cites radical poet Della Crusca in the prologue but uses lines from the reactionary Edmund Burke in the epilogue. Derogatory and racist stereotypes are employed, yet abolitionist, gender and rights issues are raised; the brave military praised, yet imperial aggression censured.

Cowley returned to the genre of comedy for her last play, *The Town*, and the final chapter examines her linking themes from earlier plays of fraudulent connoisseurship and the exclusivity of the discourse of aesthetics, neatly countering hegemonic, voyeuristic male connoisseurship with female artistic creativity. In her portrait of a female sculptor, Cowley considers the conflict for a female artist between the demands of her art and her responsibilities as a woman. Thwarted in her ambition of raising the status of comedy, Cowley abandoned drama at the height of her fame. The chapter also addresses her turn to epic poetry, following attempts at several dramatic genres; it is consistent with her continuing search for a genre which might give her the scope to treat subjects of public and national interest at a time when the country was preoccupied with war and revolution in France, and with the losses and gains of empire.

# Copyright

Copyright