1. Atlantic Underclasses and Early American Theatre Culture

In December 1775, outside London’s Covent Garden theatre, rogue characters staged a scene of underclass defiance. Although taking place in London, the event reveals the contours of circumatlantic theatre culture. It started with a young girl’s struggle with parental authority: a teenage actress named Ann Brown eloped and fled her apparently controlling father. Mr. Brown, opposed to the fast-living theatre world, forcibly carried her away from London in a coach. Ann put her histrionic skills to good use as they rolled through an outlying village, alerting onlookers that her father “was carrying her away by force, in order to ship her for America.” At that moment, her struggle became a public performance. The young actress’s improvisation likens her father’s enforcement of parental authority to criminal transportation or the press gangs that unscrupulously sent Britain’s less fortunate along circumatlantic routes of forced labor and inter-imperial conflict. Responding to her pleas, onlookers freed the actress and returned her to the care of an aunt more sympathetic to the stage. Ann Brown returned to act at Covent Garden during the 1776–77 season; this scene, however, is only the opening act in a more spectacular drama.

Brown had built a reputation in the late 1770s, roguishly crossing gender lines on stage; she played the two lead roles in John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*, performing as Polly at Covent Garden and as her highwayman lover Macheath in cross-dressed productions at the Haymarket Theatre. The parts and her theatrical versatility had made Brown an “amazing favorite” with her public, according to biographers. Those rogue roles also inflected offstage life, and Brown’s teenage rebellion replays and improvises on her most popular onstage parts. Like Polly Peachum in *The Beggar’s Opera*, Brown defied her father to pursue an undesirable match. Her act also echoes Gay’s lesser-known sequel *Polly*, which sends its female lead on a cross-dressed Caribbean search for her husband Macheath. As Polly, Ann replays Gay’s fugitive dramas of captivity and Atlantic mobility that had regained popularity in the 1770s (*Polly*, although published in 1729, saw its first performance in 1777). As in those plays, Ann’s rebellion centers on the problems and possibilities of female agency in the Atlantic world, contesting restraints and asserting her youthful independence. Life imitates art as character types and plot lines spill over the confines of the London stage. With her theatrical training, Brown may even have consciously adapted Gay’s characters as models for her rebelliously theatrical escape.
Brown’s story reached its sensational climax later that same year when her dilemma called up the very outlaw gang that had defined her stage career. In the autumn of 1776, the conflict made the newspapers again:

Friday night Mr. Brown, the coal-merchant, whose daughter eloped from him some months since, attempted to seize her, as she stopped in a coach at the end of the play-house passage in Bow-street. The little Syren was accompanied by her aunt, who made a great outcry, and told the populace Mr. Brown was mad; the alarm presently reached the play-house, and the theatrical garrison sallied out in great numbers, headed by Messrs. M— —, B— —, W— —, and S— —, to relieve the distressed damsel. The thieves in the Beggar’s Opera, armed with pistols, &c. made a most formidable appearance, and the crowd was so numerous, that for a considerable time the street was impassable. At length, however, the lady was handed into the play-house in triumph, and, notwithstanding her great agitation of spirits, performed the part of Polly greatly to the satisfaction of a very numerous and brilliant audience, who received her with repeated shouts of applause.3

The scene is complexly theatrical. The girl’s aunt preempts the typical misogynist charge of hysteria, histrionically accusing Mr. Brown of madness. A “theatrical garrison” costumed as a gang of thieves reclaims one of their own from the grips of parental authority, assisted by a street-clogging audience-turned-mob. As the newspaper report suggests, it must have seemed as if the imaginative world of The Beggar’s Opera had spilled over the boundaries of the stage. The London streets transform, however briefly, into the domain of a gang of charismatic outlaws who chronically flaunted their escapes from the law. The scene embodies an inversive, carnivalesque playworld in which the low mimicked and mocked the high to popular acclaim. Just down the street from the Bow Street offices of Henry and John Fielding’s thief-catching operations, the stage materializes a world in which rogues and their gangs, assisted by the riot-ready eighteenth-century mob, successfully make their stand.

Brown’s fear of transportation to America situates this story in the circumatlantic routes that shaped English and early American theatre. Any view of Philadelphia, New York City, or Boston theatricals inevitably finds itself tracking London and provincial English theatre, and this is no exception. Atlantic theatre follows the same routes that threaten to carry a young actress away from her admiring audiences. Scripts, actors, and theatre’s material resources move along circumatlantic trajectories; they pass among theatrical sites, creating common cultures of Atlantic theatricality. As a result, widely shared modes of performance permeate late-eighteenth-century Anglo-Atlantic culture, articulating public senses of subjectivity and agency. Acting in this thickly textured culture of conventional social performance and formal theatre, Ann Brown’s rescuers do not bother with fine distinctions between the “imaginary” world of the stage and the “reality” of offstage actions. Actors exit the playhouse and enter street scenes. Street performances also feed into stage acts; after her rescue, Brown quickly transitioned into her onstage performance of Polly, “notwithstanding her great agitation of spirits.”4 Macheath and his gang freely traverse the “fourth wall” (and the playhouse’s other walls as well) that later conventions imagine dividing the play from its contexts. The “shimmering liquid play on the themes of self-expression and self-concealment” that Terry Castle finds in the masquerade are, indeed, “exemplary phenomena of the period.”5