

Dr David Fallon
14 Portland Mews
Newcastle
NE2 1RW

David.fallon@roehampton.ac.uk

Abstract

This article examines how in its representation of old age Thomas Holcroft's play *Duplicity* (1781) registers the impact of concerns over the welfare of his own ageing father as well as the influence of French sentimental comedy. Via a comparison with the rough comedy directed at the character of Solomon Flint in Samuel Foote's *The Maid of Bath* (1778), the article shows Holcroft's more sympathetic comic treatment of his elderly character Vandervelt. The play represents a progressive shift, associated with the influence of sentimentalism, in the representation of the old man, and anticipates some of the ways in which Romantic writers paid greater attention to questions of interior experience in relation to ageing. The article notes, however, a residual use of the old man as a personification when it comes to national identity, but one orientated towards a pacific resolution of Anglo-Dutch rivalry.

Keywords: Holcroft, Foote, ageing, longevity, comedy, sentiment

“Can you say I am an old man?”: Sentiment and the Mask of Ageing in Thomas Holcroft’s *Duplicity* (1781)

The old person, especially the old man, is frequently a focus of interpretative activity in the literature of the Romantic period. In a literary era so often distinguished for its emphasis on mental experience and an ‘interior turn’, we should not be surprised to find writers exploring the gap between the social meanings usually ascribed to the visible bodies of the aged and their more complex subjective lived experience. This phenomenon is familiar to modern gerontologists. John Vincent refers to ‘the mask of ageing’, by which there is a disjunction between the ‘interior age’ and the ‘externally manifest ageing appearance’.¹ Usually gerontologists are interested in how this gap excludes or restricts the elderly, with visual traces of ageing interpreted so as to homogenise the old in a collective identity, thereby disciplining unruly desires, which might actually be the very forces which sustain and animate longevity. From at least the time of Seneca, Stoic philosophy and, indeed, popular wisdom have resisted this tendency, countering such narratives with the notion that ageing is not simply quantitative, an accumulation of years, but is affected by qualitative factors.²

Many Romantic writers represented the visible and physical self as a kind of text on which experience is inscribed, often in unsettling or surprising ways. Notably, many deployed the mask of ageing in the contrary direction, to express the toll that traumatic emotional experience takes on an externally youthful subject as a rapid inner ageing. The title character in Byron’s *Manfred* (1817), for example, histrionically insists to the Chamois Hunter ‘I tell thee, man! I have lived many years, / Many long years’, the repetition adding to the weight of qualitative experience (II, i, 42-5).³ Such constructions imply an elastic relation between private experience and its visible traces.

This elasticity works against the tendency by which the literary elderly become personifications. As Helen Small notes, ‘Old age in literature is rarely if ever only about itself’.⁴ In this essay I want to suggest that the long-standing use of the old man as a personification is, in the Romantic period, brought into tension with an increasing recognition of the interiority of the elderly. Wordsworth exemplifies this in ‘Old Man Travelling’, in which the narrator’s complacent view of the old man’s ‘Animal Tranquillity and Decay’ is disrupted by the man’s account of his painful journey to see his dying son. Such variations

between the old person's external 'mask' and inner experience stimulate interpretation but have the potential for disruption.

To this end, I will look at how sentiment and the conflicted representation of an old man in the subplot of Thomas Holcroft's comedy *Duplicity* (1781) anticipate this Romantic turn. Critics have focused on the play's mainplot, the protoradicalism of Holcroft's concern with mediating truth, and his sympathetic representation of Jews.⁵ His progressive agenda is also partially realised in the play's representation of old age. By contrast, I will examine a typically robust and unsympathetic comic treatment of the old man in Samuel Foote's *The Maid of Bath* (1771, published 1778). This comparison distinguishes Holcroft's Mr Vandervelt as a mixture of traditional broad comedy with an acute sentimental dimension, which accords the old man unusual sympathetic interiority.

The precarious state of old age evidently preoccupied Holcroft in 1780. His father had settled in a cottage near Bath, but remained financially insecure. Holcroft hoped his success as a writer could alleviate his parents' situation. He tenderly enquired of his father 'what you chiefly depend on for your livelihood' and begged him 'not to be unhappy':

When you can no longer make up your payments, give up your all and come to me. ... I am afraid you think the little I have hitherto done for you an obligation: I think I discover it in your letters. Let me intreat you, do not consider it in this light. You cherished me in infancy, and I should be very wicked to see you perish in age; you loved me then, and I love and reverence you now. ... I hope you bear the burden of old age cheerfully: nothing but indifference to the accidents of life can make them supportable.⁶

Holcroft's reassurance and balanced sentences assert reciprocal emotional bonds between the generations. Likewise, his conventional Stoic advice to support 'the burden of old age cheerfully' implicates himself in a shared human condition. While Holcroft tells his father 'You are travelling towards the grave', he is 'following you very fast, nay, possibly may finish the journey before you; but let us not be unhappy on that account: we shall rest from our labours'. Writing on 31 March, Holcroft was particularly concerned that his proud father would over-exert himself, trying to increase production from his smallholding to meet a loan from a friend, Mr Freeman:

Your property in your garden, and your own integrity, dear Sir, are sufficient security; but I would willingly remove every burden from your shoulders, as well as give Mr. Freeman every certainty in my power. I am every day more esteemed, and I believe, if I have life and health, there is little doubt of my success. I hope, Sir, you will not think me rude in cautioning you not to be too eager in increasing your stock; as by having more affairs on your hands than your small capital can supply, you may easily lose the whole; besides that you bring a degree of trouble and anxiety on your mind that your health cannot now support perhaps. (348)

Holcroft balances concern with deference, again merging his own fortunes with those of his parents. Holcroft identifies *Duplicity*'s fate with his father's status: 'its success has been very flattering, and no circumstance relative to it gives me more satisfaction than that I shall now be enabled to provide for my dear father' (*Memoirs of Holcroft*, 133). While at pains to respect his father's independence, Holcroft registers his concerns both in the play and the hopes he attached to its success.

Duplicity opened as the mainpiece at Covent Garden on Saturday 13 October 1781 to great applause, taking £204 16s. on its first night. However, the manager, Thomas Harris, decided to stage it at intervals until 28 December, which Holcroft believed damaged the success a straight run would have achieved.⁷ The play centres on the friendship of Sir Harry Portland and Mr Osborne, who met when Harry saved the latter from banditti in Italy. Sir Harry is now addicted to gambling, according to his sister Melissa, Osborne's love interest, 'almost his only weakness' (I, i, 3).⁸ The female lead, Clara, reports rumours that Osborne is encouraging Harry's addiction for personal profit. Melissa dismisses this as malicious gossip. Meanwhile, Harry and Melissa's uncle, the impetuous Sir Hornet Armstrong, having admired Clara in Bath and hoping for a good match for his nephew, enquired after her name and confuses her with the country clown Miss Turnbull, whom he invites, with her brother, to London to develop the match. Much broad comedy ensues. Clara is under the guardianship of the 67-year-old Mr Vandervelt, who calls her 'my turtle', secretly hoping his love will be reciprocated. She maintains control in this relationship, gently disappointing him by calling him 'papa'. Osborne exposes the duplicity of the title when he reveals he has deliberately taken Harry's riches at the gaming table. However, he disarms the general horror by revealing a doubly virtuous motive: to protect Harry and his fortune from exploitation by other gamblers, and also to promote moral reform, forcing Harry to recognise the dangers of gaming. Osborne has kept all Harry's money, including his sister's fortune, gambled and lost

in desperation, and returns it. Harry can now marry Clara, to which Vandervelt reluctantly agrees, and Melissa and Osborne are united.

The generally overlooked comic subplot featuring Vandervelt parallels the primary plot but also reveals Holcroft's cosmopolitanism and sentimental softening of standard comic types of the foreigner and old man, so familiar to the eighteenth-century theatre.⁹ The play opened with Vandervelt performed by Ralph Wewitzer, a comedian specialising in foreigners, particularly Frenchmen, Germans, Jews, and old men.¹⁰ Holcroft was reputed to have intended the part of Vandervelt for John Quick. In 1820, William Hazlitt recalled that Quick was excellent as a 'crusty old guardian, in a brown suit and a bob wig', while Richard Jenkins remembered his performances of old men: 'There was a peculiarity in his voice which rendered his old characters exceedingly whimsical'.¹¹ Whimsy, as playful quaintness, is particularly appropriate for the depiction of an old man who combines eccentricity, romance, and absurdity. Quick was indisposed and replaced with Ralph Wewitzer. One reviewer, conceding that Wewitzer's 'comic abilities are very great' and his taking of the role 'laudable', for undisclosed reasons felt that 'he went out of his line of acting' to portray Vandervelt.¹² Wewitzer also fell ill and Holcroft, himself distinguished for playing eccentric old men, took over on 1 November and thereafter, suggesting a particular concern for this role's success (*Memoirs of Holcroft*, 135).

As Simon Dickie has shown, deliberately callous jokes at the expense of the elderly were part of the rough, unsentimental world of eighteenth-century jestbooks and popular humour.¹³ The May-December (sometimes January-May) love-match was a staple of popular culture, such as ballads, with the comedy sharpened against old men using riches to ensnare a teenage bride.¹⁴ The comical old man was a traditional figure on the European stage, often following character types of the Commedia dell'Arte: Pantaloon and The Doctor. Pantaloon is an object of comic scorn, an old man who pretends to be young, lusts after young women, and is inevitably duped. The Doctor is also lustful, but also an obscure pedant, priding himself in obscure learning and fatuous and incomprehensible talk.¹⁵ In Vandervelt's secret aspirations to marry his ward Clara and his antiquarian researches into histories of longevity, Holcroft combines aspects of both of these types. Nevertheless, as I will show, *Duplicity* distinctively softens the humour. Vandervelt is undoubtedly an object of mirth, but laughter is modified with a gentle, sympathetic strain.

An instructive contrast to *Duplicity* can be seen in the more traditional comic handling of the old man in Samuel Foote's three act comedy *The Maid of Bath*, which opened at the Haymarket Theatre in 1771. During his career as an actor, Holcroft became acquainted with

Foote and performed at the Haymarket with his company during its summer 1770 season. Holcroft remained an admirer of Foote's satirical comedy. Belden identifies several Foote plays from which Holcroft borrowed in his own comedies.¹⁶ After Foote died in 1777, Holcroft composed a moving elegy, published with another 'On Age', which I will go on to discuss. From a graver present day, the narrator asks 'Where now's that pliant Muscle big with Whim ... And all the mirth-fed Features of Grimace?'¹⁷ Holcroft's *ubi sunt* mourns for Foote's vigorous physical comedy. Juxtaposing the poem with an elegy on old age implies that Holcroft regarded Foote's comedy as part of a bygone time; while missed, it could not be recalled. While *Duplicity* draws comic vigour from Foote's theatre, it handles the amorous old man with greater subtlety.

Foote loosely based *The Maid of Bath* on the famous case of Elizabeth Linley, the beautiful young singer from Bath and future wife of Richard Brinsley Sheridan. She was engaged to the elderly Sir Walter Long in 1770.¹⁸ Belden notes that many of Foote's characters were recognisable figures from Bath society.¹⁹ David Garrick's prologue sets the harsh satirical tone from the outset, promising the audience that Flint is equivalent to a fabulous 'monster' preying on a virgin and calls 'Tollyo!—a rank old *fox* we now pursue' (i-ii).²⁰ The play begins at the Bear Inn, where the rakish Major Racket meets his old friend Sir Christopher Cripple, struggling to reform and mend his reputation after past scrapes. They discuss sixteen-year-old Kitty Linnet's arranged engagement with Solomon Flint, an old Jewish miser, played to great comic effect by Foote in the original performance. Kitty's mother is driving the match. Racket and Cripple see it as a classic December-May case:

Rack. Who is it?

Sir Chr. An acquaintance of yours—only that old fusty, shabby, shuffling, money-loving, water-drinking, mirth-marring, amorous old hunks, Master Solomon Flint.

Rack. He that enjoys—I mean owns, half the farms in the country.

Sir Chr. He, even he.

Rack. Why, he is sixty at least; what a filthy old goat! but then, how does this design suit with his avarice? the girl has no fortune ...

Sir Chr. ... I believe his main motive is the hopes of an heir. (I, i, 13)

Cripple's cumbersome adjectival catalogue culminates in Flint, personifying age-related (and implicitly ethnic) defects. Racket believes Cripple's explanation that property is Flint's

motive. Horrified by this 'scheme', Racket feels it 'is impossible she can be fond of the fellow'. Cripple describes a gothic conspiracy of the old against the young; she will be whisked from Bath's pleasures: 'the rumbling old family-coach carries her immediately from the church door to his moated, haunted old house in the country', where she will be watched 'by no less than two brace of his sisters, four as malicious, musty old maids as ever were soured by solitude and the neglect of the world' (I, i, 14). Rackett, however, is no altruist; he hopes to win Kitty himself by intervening.

Blind to modern urban leisure's appeal, Flint struggles to woo a reluctant Kitty. He recommends the country: 'I can't see what pleasure pretty Misses can take in galloping to plays, and to balls, and such expensive vagaries' (II, i, 33-34). He promises instead dreary drudgery: 'what with minding the dairy, dunning the tenants, preserving and pickling, nursing the children, scolding the servants, mending and making, roasting, boiling and baking, you won't have a moment to spare' (II, i, 35-36). Proud to have boarded up most of his windows 'in order to save paying tax', Flint promises a bedroom replete with the 'hatchments of all the folks that have dy'd in the family' and a pigeon house over their bed (II, i, 37). His gifts to Kitty, including a Queen Anne half-crown and his Aunt Bother'em's mourning rings, symbolise morbid elderliness. Flint reveals an instrumental attitude towards marriage when he later tells Peter Poullice 'wives, you know, are allowed to make very good nurses ... besides they don't cost one a farthing' (III, i, 51).

Racket plans to work on Flint's weaknesses, hoping 'public opinion, his various doubts of himself, and of her, the pride of his family, and the loud clams of avarice, his ruling passion 'till now' will prove 'an equipoise to his love?' (I, i, 17). With the help of their friends, Racket and Cripple intensify Flint's anxieties over marriage, retailing elderly husbands' rapid deaths, expensive wives, disruptions to the husband's domestic routine (especially his afternoon nap), and children leading to debts. They easily persuade him to try to get her 'on easier terms than marriage' (III, i, 57). When Flint proposes this, Kitty and her guardian, Lady Catherine Coldstream, are horrified. Catherine and Rackett decide to bring him to trial for reparation. She and Cripple also plan Flint's further public exposure: 'you mun ken, good folk, at Edinburgh last winter, I got acquainted with Maister Fout, the play-actor—I will get him to bring the filthy loon on to the stage—'. Cripple replies 'And expose him to the contempt of the world; he richly deserves it' (III, i, 65). John Badcock believed that the play forced Walter Long to settle the dispute on generous terms for Elizabeth.²¹

While an identifiable figure from Bath society, Flint is also a comic type, personifying the negative characteristics of the old suitor. Foote's preface to *The Comic Theatre* (1762) outlined his theory of comedy, drawn from the classical humours tradition:

The original purpose of comedy was to expose particular follies for the punishment of individuals, and as an example to the whole community; but as this mental physic might prove nauseous and disagreeable to the public palate, it was found necessary to sweeten the dose, by conveying it in the pleasing form of a fable; so that plot, incident, and all the mechanical parts of a play, are to be considered in a secondary light, and as but the mere vehicles of an important medicine.²²

This popular, disciplinary, and masculine mode has as its 'great comic object' the exposure to public ridicule of a type of folly, what Foote calls 'that specific difference in the mind of one man, which renders him ridiculous to the rest of his cotemporaries' (viii). Flint's absurdity is twofold: his lasciviousness and miserliness confirm stereotypes of humoural comedy at the expense of the elderly, rooted in Aristotelian ideas and Galenic medical notions that old men became cold and dry.²³

As Davis notes, Foote's 'vividly drawn eccentrics' are 'firmly in the humours tradition; each acts according to his bias'. The comedy is rough: 'Foote's memorable creations are to be laughed at, rather than laughed with. No sympathy is possible, or invited, for characters drawn in this manner' (Chatten, 139). If there is any sentiment in *The Maid of Bath*, it is deservedly directed at the persecuted Kitty, but in theatrical terms she is secondary, a pretext to set off the portrayal of Flint as a monstrous caricature of callous and miserly old age. Ian Kelly notes the *St James's Chronicle's* opinion that Foote's 'Primitive Puppet Show' in 1773, particularly his parodies on contemporary acting styles and trends, was popular with audiences because it attacked and effectively ended the recent vogue for 'hackneyed sentimental comedies'.²⁴ While Holcroft admired Foote's rumbustious performances and humour, he retained a commitment to the potential of sentimental drama.

By contrast to Flint's oppressive engagement with Kitty Linnet, in *Duplicity* Vandervelt's pursuit of Clara, albeit creepy, is human: playful, tender, and tentative. The independent and witty Clara clearly feels under no pressure, unlike Kitty. Whereas Flint seeks a wife as a possession, Vandervelt is moved by a deep human need for companionship. He tells Clara of his melancholy, having 'no relations—no children' despite having 'made a great fortune by care, and labour, and anxiety, and debarring myself the pleasures, and

comforts of life, in my youth' (II, ii, 24). While Flint selfishly hoards, Vandervelt seeks the opportunity to share his wealth while he can. Justifying his suit, he emphasises that outward old age is a mask. Conventional views of the aged are misguided and unjust:

Vandervelt. ... The world has got false notions—A man of fifty is called old, and must not be in love, for fear of being pointed at—Whereas some men are older at thirty, than others at threescore. (II, ii, 24)

While whimsical, Vandervelt's relativism has its own logic, resisting the increasing tendency in the later eighteenth century to emphasise calendar age rather than behaviour and capability in determining who was old.²⁵

Vandervelt justifies his flexible view of ageing with examples of 'old worthies'. He tells Clara of the Yorkshire fisherman Henry Jenkins, who 'lived to a hundred and sixty-nine'. This proves that 'a man of sixty, even in these degenerate days, has a chance to live at least an hundred years' (II, ii, 25). Such figures were staples of popular culture, depicted on broadsheet engravings as curiosities and, no doubt, examples of virtuous old age to foster emulation and hopes for longevity in viewers.²⁶ Vandervelt's dubious antiquarian researches take his hopes for longevity to a comic excess, in a form of risky speculation which parallels Harry's ruinous gambling. While unappealing to Clara, his waywardness does not invalidate his entitlement to love or a family and, if viewed in a more modest light, his hopes for the elasticity and relativity of old age imply that the human condition is not fixed and might be improved, anticipating an important progressive theme of the 1790s.

Vandervelt shares his commonplace book of worthies with Sir Hornet Armstrong, whose bluff John-Bullish laughter deflates his friend's romantic aspirations. Vandervelt's examples progress from the relatively plausible Patrick O'Neal ('married, for the seventh time, at the age of one hundred and thirteen' with 123 grandchildren), through Thomas Parr (in love at 120), and to Henry Jenkins. The doubtful historicity of the worthies dissipates: Vandervelt follows up with Johannes de Temporibus, 'armour-bearer to the emperor Charlemagne' (III, ii, 43-44) who lived to 361.²⁷ When Vandervelt asks 'when you compare sixty-seven to three hundred threescore and one, can you say I am an old man?', Hornet comically trumps him: 'An old man!—by the beard of Methuselah thou art scarce an infant—it will be perhaps five years yet before thou art perfectly a child'. Hornet uses the oldest figure in the Bible, Methuselah (969), emphasising that Vandervelt's hopes lead him into an absurd dimension of myth and legend. These antiquarian researches are fusty: while popular

in the seventeenth and earlier eighteenth century, the lives of the Biblical patriarchs and folk precedents of extraordinary longevity looked increasingly quaint with medicine and political economy coming to be the predominant public discourses for discussions of ageing during the Romantic period.²⁸

Nevertheless, it is not clear at precisely what point Vandervelt loses touch with reality. Despite the laughter, Hornet is not entirely unsympathetic. He initially agrees when his friend complains ‘I ruminates on these things by myself, till I am quite melancholy—Now, if I had but somebody to bear half my griefs, I should suppose—they should be lessened’ (III, ii, 44). But Vandervelt’s revelation of Clara as his choice precipitates Hornet’s chortles. Vandervelt’s identity and desires chafe against the chaste limits socially prescribed for respectable old age. Hornet voices conventional wisdom which mirrors internal and external identities: ‘Every body imagined him to be a prudent, sedate, grave person ... it was evident his beard was grey, his limbs palsied, his skin shriveled, and his sinews shrunk’ (III, ii, 46). He should be ‘meditating, like a pious Christian, on the four last things’, but instead ‘buys a three-penny fiddle, scrapes a matrimonial jig, claps a pair of horns upon his head, and curvets thro’ the town, the sport of the mob, derided by the young, pitied by the old, and laughed at by all the world’ (III, ii, 46-47). Vandervelt retreats, insisting he was joking. As in *The Maid of Bath*, ridicule is the mechanism whereby the inner, desiring self is obliged to fit to the socially determined contours of the mask of old age. Here, however, Vandervelt is corrected by forthright but good-humoured mockery in private conversation. He is led to anticipate wider ridicule, while Flint deserves his actual public humiliation.

Holcroft’s willingness to mingle sympathy with disciplinary comedy draws his depiction of old age into the play’s broader moral aims. For Webster, ‘Using sentimentalism for didactic purposes was Holcroft’s primary purpose in *Duplicity*’.²⁹ The play’s preface defends ‘the French *Comédie Larmoyante*, or, as we call it, Sentimental Comedy’, introduced to England ‘about fourteen years ago’, against English detractors who embraced the native English comedy of Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773). Sentimental comedy is a mode fitting Holcroft’s moral and improving aims: the play’s ‘intention’ to attack the ‘truly enormous’ vice of gambling, ‘is of a far nobler nature than the mere incitement of risibility’ (vi). This cosmopolitan stimulus tempers the broad comedy, also showing the influence of a shift in late eighteenth-century French culture towards a more sentimental attitude towards the elderly.³⁰ Defending the cloddish Turnbolls, Holcroft celebrates social progress, especially refined contemporary manners: ‘A sense of propriety spreads in proportion as people read’. He insists that ‘were the humour of Smollet ... spoken upon the stage, it would

frequently excite universal disgust' (v). While Holcroft channels sentiment most clearly in Harry's despair and Osborne's moving display of loyalty, Vandervelt also reflects the extension of sentiment and sympathy.

In 1777, alongside the ode to Foote, Holcroft published an 'Elegy on Age'. The poem's advertisement asserts that 'There is not any Thing, I believe, which calls forth the melancholy and sympathetic Passions more forcibly than a Sight of those Men who have once been great or famous, and have outlived their fortunes or Faculties'.³¹ The 80-year-old narrator recalls 'I once was young, alack the Day!' His exclamation echoes the catchphrase of Sir Harry's old servant, Timid ('lackaday!'), in *Duplicity*. The narrator mourns lost virility and strength:

My auburn Ringlets, once so gay,
 Could win the Sigh, the wishing Glance;
And envied went that Lass away
 Who join'd me in the rustic Dance.

My bald Head, sprinkled o'er with grey,
 Wins nothing but predictive Tears,
Reminding Man, from Day to Day,
 Th'effects of much-desired Years.³²

Movingly, while the narrator's body provides continuity it also registers self-estrangement. Longevity ('much-desired Years') is also a curse, temporally stranding the man from the pleasure-seeking self he remembers. This tragic disjunction between desire (winning glances and sights) and its reception (he now 'Wins nothing' but tears), gets smoothed with laughs in *Duplicity*, but traces of pathos remain.

Unusually, Holcroft provides Vandervelt with sincere interiority and feeling which countervail the humour at his expense. In a soliloquy opening Act II, Scene ii, he meditates:

Clara is very beautiful—but mankind is very censorious—They will tell me, that sixty-seven is too late in life to undertake the begetting, bringing up, and providing for a family—What of that ... Must I leave no pretty picture of myself?—Sixty-seven is but sixty-seven—Have we not a thousand examples of longevity upon record? (II, ii, 23)

The age of 67 is significant; Vandervelt is not quite at the biblical standard of ‘three score and ten’ (Psalms 90:10) but has entered the ‘grand climacteric’ at 63, a period when decline or death was often anticipated, but which could be followed with greater longevity.³³ His life-stage is thus ambiguous. Much, of course, depends on how Vandervelt was acted. The play text suggests he retains his capacity for enjoyment. His fundamental point about the relativity and inner experience of ageing is never actually rebutted. Likewise, the hearty, contagious laughter at Hornet and the Turnbells, which he shares with Clara (at one point their laughter is bracketed together), suggests a shared physical discharge of vigorous energy which evades repression, perhaps arising from deeper sexual motivations.³⁴ This leaves open the possibility that Vandervelt’s matrimonial dreams may not be as unreasonable as Hornet believes, even if the conventional comic plot precludes their realisation.

In relation to questions of ageing, the two subplots connect to the main plot. The country bumpkins, the Turnbells, are inversions of Harry and Melissa. Unpolished manners, childlike enthusiasm to ‘zee the lions and the wax-work[s]’ (II, I, 17), and rough rustic idioms (such as the Germanic ‘bist’ for ‘are’) mark their backwardness in contrast to witty and fashionable metropolitan modernity. Melissa says of their tourist itinerary, ‘People of fashion never go to those kind of places’ (II, i, 18). The infantile Turnbells belong to Flint’s moribund traditions of country life. Indeed, Holcroft subtly connects Vandervelt’s aspirations for romance, security and fulfilment with the Turnbells’ old-fashioned rusticity and ham-fisted attempts to gain social advantage through marriage. While discussing Hornet’s extraordinary encouragement of Miss Turnbull as a match for his nephew, Melissa tells Harry that ‘I left her with my woman, staring, like a Dutch doll, at every thing she fixed her eyes on’ (II, i, 16). Miss Turnbull’s belief she is a suitable match for Harry parallels the play’s other ill-founded speculations: Vandervelt’s pursuit of Clara and Harry’s desperate overreaching at the gaming table.

While the Turnbells return to the country, rejecting city sophistication, in his soliloquy, Vandervelt links his own ageing with the general progress of politeness and refinement: ‘Times, men, and manners alter—Children are born wittier, and the world gets more sedate—I myself am a living proof of it—I never go to bagnios now—I never break lamps, beat watchmen, and kick constables now’ (I, ii, 23). As with his wooing, his recollection of a wild youth suggests latent or potential physical vigour, however belied by his appearance, while he perceives his own ageing process to bring him closer to the ‘sedate’, civilised modern world.

The Vandervelt subplot links to the mainplot in the shared concern with forms of speculation. Both the aristocratic vice of gaming and starting a family at an advanced age are risks at odds with a controlled, polite, and sophisticated modern culture, represented particularly by the witty Clara and Melissa. Yet the play's outcome, particularly Osborne's preservation of Harry's property, also validates old-fashioned loyalties. There is perhaps truth in Osborne's jest to Clara: 'Oh, Madam, the old men are the only polite men of this age' (I, i, 6).

While I have been arguing that Holcroft added an important dimension of sympathetic interiority and complexity to Vandervelt compared to the ludicrous stock aged lover, the tendency to make old characters representative types rather than discrete individuals creeps back into play in relation to national identities. As Philip Cox notes, 'direct "political" reference' in Holcroft's plays 'is very thin on the ground, as indeed, one would expect from the processes of censorship at work within the contemporary theatre'.³⁵ Nevertheless, politics come to the fore in Act III, Scene ii, when Hornet patriotically attacks the stock-jobber Scrip. Scrip complains of being 'distressed for bad news'. Hornet is astonished to hear him hope for 'any great national misfortune', which would 'exactly close [his] account':

Sir Hornet. You raven-faced rascal!—Rejoice at national misfortunes!

Zounds! I thought such language was no where to be heard from the mouth of an Englishman—unless he were a Member of Parliament.

Belying his age, Hornet concludes the dialogue by driving him away with his cane, no doubt to the delight of the audience. He asserts that 'a nation will never flourish, that encourages traders to thrive by her misfortunes' (III, ii, 34-3).³⁶ Bluff civic humanist values seem to be vigorous guards against the rootless depredations of modern speculators.

The context in which Holcroft wrote *Duplicity* and in which it was performed would suggest that Vandervelt's nationality provides an oblique comment on contemporary politics and anticipates some of Holcroft's more explicitly political writing. A patriotic audience receptive to these digs at corruption might also have connected Vandervelt with wider public issues. His name evidently distinguishes his nationality. Clara's comical description of his 'little pug nose, that looks as red and bright as the best Dutch sealing wax' (I, i, 6) connects him with Dutch trade and bureaucracy. Polite members of the audience interested in the arts may have linked his name to the painters Willem van de Velde the Elder (1611-93) and the Younger (1633-1707), who specialised in marine subjects and in sea-battles, often involving

the British. Holcroft may have been familiar with their work; he enjoyed visiting exhibitions and collecting prints and artworks. These artists' paintings were frequently auctioned during the later eighteenth century.³⁷

By the later eighteenth century, the Dutch Republic appeared to be in decline, compared to its financial, commercial, and military heyday. Simon Schama describes the period as its 'dotage'. The economy was stagnating and contracting especially in relation to commercial trade, with ensuing urban depopulation.³⁸ This reflected a process by which many elite Dutch merchants focused their operations on London. A Patriot movement, opposed the ruling House of Orange and the Stadtholder, William V, began campaigning for a rebirth of Dutch republican freedom. The American Revolutionary War provided the pretext for opposition to the Stadtholder's pro-British policy, while Dutch merchants and traders became involved in supplying weapons, ammunition and other supplies to the rebels and the French, when they joined the conflict, leading to increasing tensions between Britain and Holland and finally war at the end of 1780.³⁹ Lasting from 1780 to 1784, it fatally exposed the Netherlands' military and especially naval weaknesses.

Duplicity's overt appeal to the audience's patriotism was performed in this context. The comic Dutch character had obvious topical potential. Available reviews do not make clear how Vandervelt was performed or received by theatre audiences, but his unruly libido and aspirations to secure a beautiful young Englishwoman could well have been interpreted in relation to Dutch efforts to rejuvenate their nation to become Britain's rival on a world stage.

By extending sympathy to the Dutchman, however, Holcroft's play works against straightforward national oppositions. Indeed, after mocking Vandervelt's pretensions to Clara, Hornet then becomes the butt of Vandervelt and Clara's laughter for his impetuous misunderstanding over Miss Turnbull's identity. Hornet has to admit to Vandervelt that, while 'You're an old fool', 'I am another', before exiting '*in a passion*', followed by '*Clara and Vandervelt, laughing*' (IV, i, 62). If the foreigner is subject to corrective comedy, so is the over-confident Englishman. Likewise, the parallels between Sir Harry's reckless gambling and Vandervelt's romantic aspirations serve to collapse national differences. Indeed, Holcroft subtly connects the two plots: Osborne tells Harry's servant, the elderly Timid, that the Jewish money-lender who will provide him with £10,000 is 'Isaac Levi, agent to a private company at Amsterdam' (I, ii, 15).

While Vandervelt must reluctantly give up Clara to the younger Harry, Holcroft's conclusion handles this relatively gently, with some sympathy. Hornet takes him aside and

privately advises ‘Resign all your silly pretensions peaceably, throw your worthies into the fire, and give up the lady to her lover’ to avoid becoming ‘an object of ridicule, to frighten all the dangling, whining, old fools in Christendom, who are turned of three-score’ (V, ii, 78). This has its parallel as Harry envisages his fate should he again succumb to gambling: ‘May I be pointed at by children, and pitied by sharpers’ (IV, i, 48). While Vandervelt fears the public exposure meted out to Flint in *The Maid of Bath*, he is neither humiliated nor overtly punished, but rather internalises social pressures and chooses not to struggle against them. Moments of sympathy for Vandervelt’s human desire for companionship work against conventional comic mockery of the stage foreigner and old man. Holcroft engages his audience’s patriotic passions but also suggests the desirability of an amicable settlement of Anglo-Dutch differences.

The comic plot undoubtedly disciplines Vandervelt’s desire for Clara, but it also lays bare the mechanisms by which the fear of public opinion and humiliation overcomes deeper, individual desires. While Holcroft undoubtedly played upon his audience’s familiarity with the comical old suitor of young women, his enthusiasm for the progressive possibilities of sentimentalism, perhaps along with the sympathy he felt for his own father’s precarious position, led him to soften the sort of rough comedy that Foote directed at Solomon Flint. Sentiment for Holcroft had powerfully recuperative dimensions. In *Duplicity* the implications extend beyond the individual to wider social and political considerations. The play may conclude conventionally, with pairs of young lovers united, but Vandervelt’s unruly desires and tender yearnings remain a troubling presence which the comedy cannot completely laugh away.

¹ John Vincent, *Old Age* (London, 2003), 7.

² See Lucian Boia, *Forever Young: A Cultural History of Longevity*, trans. Trista Selous (London, 2004), 30-31.

³ *Manfred* in Lord Byron: *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (6 vols, Oxford, 1980-91), iv, 68.

⁴ Helen Small, *The Long Life* (Oxford, 2007), 6.

⁵ Eliza O’Brien, ‘“The Greatest Appearance of Truth”: Telling Tales with Thomas Holcroft’, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 28 (2016), 501-26, and Jeremy W. Webster, ‘Rewriting Shylock: Thomas Holcroft, Semitic Discourse, and Anti-Semitism on the English Stage’, in Miriam L. Wallace and A.A. Markeley (eds.), *Re-Viewing Thomas Holcroft, 1745-1809: Essays on His Works and Life* (Farnham, 2012), 71-86, 81.

⁶ *Memoirs of Thomas Holcroft, Written by Himself and Continued by William Hazlitt* (Oxford, 1926), 347.

⁷ Charles Beecher Hogan, *The London Stage 1660-1800*, Part 5: 1776-1800 (Carbondale, Ill., 1968), iii, 466-73, 486.

⁸ Holcroft, *Duplicity: A Comedy* (London, 1781). References give act, scene, and page number.

⁹ Hogan, 472. For sentimental comedy, see Misty G. Anderson, 'Genealogies of Comedy', in Julia Swindells and David Taylor (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832* (Oxford, 2014), 347-67.

¹⁰ Entry in *ODNB* and Philip Highfill, Jr., Kalman A. Burnim, and Edward A. Langhans, *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers, and other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800* (16 vols, Carbondale, Ill., 1973), xvi, 17-22.

¹¹ 'On Play-Going and Some of our Old Actors' (1820), in P.P. Howe (ed.), *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt* (21 vols, London, 1930-34), xviii, 274, and Richard Jenkins, *Memoirs of the Bristol Stage* (Bristol, 1826), 91.

¹² Review in the *London Courant*, *Westminster Chronicle*, and *Daily Advertiser*, 15 October 1781.

¹³ Simon Dickie, *Cruelty & Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, 2011), 108-916-17, 60-63, 195-98.

¹⁴ For example, see *The Doting Old Dad; or, The Rich Muckworm of Fourscore and Ten and a Young Lass Scarce Nineteen* (London, [c.1672-1696]), Bodleian Douce Ballads 1 fol. 60r, and other ballads grouped under 'Marriage—Age Difference', available at <http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk> [Accessed 1/6/17]. Thanks to Alexandra Franklin for this information. See also Susannah R. Ottaway, *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 2004), 31-35.

¹⁵ See: Allardyce Nicholl, *The World of Harlequin* (Cambridge, 1963) *passim*; Lynn A. Botelho, 'The 17th Century', in *The Long History of Old Age*, ed. by Pat Thane (London, 2005), 131, 138-40.

¹⁶ See *Memoirs of Holcroft*, 114-15. Mary Megie Belden, *The Dramatic Work of Samuel Foote* (Yale, 1929; rpt. 1969), 190-91.

¹⁷ Thomas Holcroft, *Elegies* (London, 1777), 9.

¹⁸ For the influence of Foote's play on Linley's celebrity, see Joseph Roach, "'Mistaking Earth for Heaven": Eliza Linley's Voice', in *Bluestockings Displayed: Portraiture, Performance and Patronage, 1730-1830* (Cambridge, 2013), 123-40.

¹⁹ See Belden, 141, and Elizabeth N. Chatten, *Samuel Foote* (Boston, 1980), 98-99.

²⁰ Samuel Foote, *The Maid of Bath* (London, 1778). References give act, scene, and page number.

²¹ Chatten, 100.

²² *The Comic Theatre. Being a free translation of all the best French comedies. By Samuel Foote, Esq. and others* (5 vols, London, 1762), i, v-vi.

²³ See Andrea Charise, 'Romanticism Against Youth', *Essays in Romanticism*, 20 (2013), 83-100 (92) and Ottaway, 33-34.

²⁴ *St James's Chronicle*, 13 February 1773, quoted in Ian Kelly, *Mr Foote's Other Leg* (London: Picador, 2012), 275-76.

²⁵ See Ottaway, 17-18 and 44-53.

²⁶ Engraved prints of Jenkins feature in the Fleming Collection, National Portrait Gallery, in volume six of Rev. James Granger, *A Biographical History of England from Egbert the Great to the Revolution* (1769), for example NPG D30693.

²⁷ See: Boia, 75-77, 123-24; David G. Troyansky 'The Eighteenth Century', 190-96, 190; and 'Henry Jenkins' and 'Thomas Parr', *ODNB*.

²⁸ See for example: Boia, 99-126; Ottaway, 51-53, 279; and Troyansky, 209.

²⁹ Webster, 77.

³⁰ See Ottaway, 13 and Troyansky, 175, 180, 185-87, 204-9.

³¹ *Elegies*, 17.

³² *Ibid.*, 23.

³³ See Ottaway, 25, 46, 54.

³⁴ See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1976), 194-95, 200-202,

³⁵ Philip Cox, Introduction to *Selected Plays, The Novels and Selected Plays of Thomas Holcroft* (5 vols, London, 2007), v, xi.

³⁶ See Cox, xii.

³⁷ For example, 'A Capital Collection of Pictures', *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, 20 April 1780.

³⁸ Simon Schama, *Patriots and Liberators: Revolution in the Netherlands, 1780-1813* (London, 1992 [1977]), 24-63.

³⁹ See F. Edler, *The Dutch Republic and The American Revolution* (Honolulu, HI, 2001 [1911]), and Schama, 45-47, 58-63.