

**“Shrill small voices . . . drowned out by the  
general trumpeting of praise”:  
The Reception of Noël Coward’s *Cavalcade***

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When Virginia Woolf first met Noël Coward at one of Sybil Colefax’s famous social gatherings in 1928, she was thoroughly charmed: she praised him as “a miracle, a prodigy” and, after seeing his hit revue, *This Year of Grace*, wrote a letter enthusiastically encouraging him to try his hand at novels that would “put these cautious, creeping novels that one has to read silently in an arm chair deep, deep in the shade” (*Letters* 3: 478). By 1934, she was referring to him in her letters as “Noël Coward whose works I despise” (*Letters* 5: 273) and dismissing his gifts in her diary as “all out of the 6d box at Woolworth’s. . . . Nothing there: but the heroic beating” (*Diary* 4: 259). By 1936, he had become a reason for her disenchantment with Sybil Colefax’s parties: “But at last, what with Noël Coward on my left and Sir Arthur [Colefax] on my right, I felt I could no longer bring myself to dine with Sibyl” (“Am I a Snob?”). Woolf’s change of heart reflects a broader shift in Coward’s reputation within intellectual and artistic circles in Britain in the late twenties and early thirties—not coincidentally, the same period that the divisive “battle of the brows” was taking place on the BBC and in literary periodicals and presses.

Right at the peak of this “battle of the brows,” Noël Coward wrote and produced *Cavalcade*, a lavish pageant of British history from the Boer War to the present day, for the largest theatre in London’s West End, the Drury Lane. Popular audiences gave the production enthusiastic standing ovations and kept it running for over 400 performances while many theatre critics lavished it with “paean of praise” (Coward, *Autobiography* 239). A few dissenters, however, criticized the play and expressed grave concern about Coward’s politically and emotionally manipulative effect on an unthinking, largely middle-class audience. The divided reception of *Cavalcade* indicates the extent to which theatre criticism both participated in and was affected by the “battle of the brows” and the resulting tensions

between so-called “highbrow” writers associated with Bloomsbury and the modernist aesthetic and “middlebrow” writers whose artistic commitments were, according to Woolf in her essay penned in the heat of these debates, “mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige” (“Middlebrow” 80).<sup>1</sup> By the time *Cavalcade* opened in October 1931, “the cultural debate had hardened into the form of antithetical camps, each ‘brow’ convinced of [its] superiority” (Cuddy-Keane 19). Coward’s own description of the response to *Cavalcade* hints at the role these increasingly entrenched cultural divisions played in its reception: “[A] few uneasy highbrows . . . deplored my fall from sophisticated wit into the bathos of jingoism, and had even gone so far as to suggest the whole thing was a wily commercial trick . . . but these shrill small voices were drowned out by the general trumpeting of praise” (Introduction ix). Furthermore, the production coincided with the economic and political crisis that produced an unprecedented Conservative landslide in the general election of 27 October 1931, two weeks after *Cavalcade* opened (Cole 143). These external cultural and political tensions played a crucial role in the play’s initial reception, resulting in a distorted critical response that had a lasting effect on Coward’s reputation. Critics used their responses to the production to take sides in these contemporary debates, often by eliding the play’s ambiguity and by magnifying those features that would help them to position themselves. Such distortions are not uncommon in creating cultural divisions and classifications. Although, as Coward indicates, the “general trumpeting of praise” temporarily drowned out the “shrill small voices” of his detractors, the divisive response to *Cavalcade* significantly damaged Coward’s reputation with “highbrow” writers and intellectuals for decades and contributed to his critical neglect in the second half of the twentieth century.

While most critical and biographical accounts of *Cavalcade* acknowledge in passing the heated debates surrounding the original production, little attention has been given to their connection to the cultural battles being waged in other media in Britain at precisely this time. Theatre has been conspicuously absent from most scholarly treatments of the “battle of the brows,” which have tended to focus primarily on radio, periodicals, books, and film. Likewise, theatre scholars who have examined popular British theatre of the interwar period have given little attention to the cultural debates that might have influenced the reception of these works or their place in cultural hierarchies.<sup>2</sup> The reception of *Cavalcade* demonstrates that the “battle of the brows” did have a significant impact on theatre, as it did on other forms of artistic production at this time, and that theatre reviews played a significant role in producing and reinforcing these cultural divisions. While in many respects theatre criticism replicates the cultural tensions one finds in other media in Britain, the presence of a live audience whose individual and collective response is observable by critics adds a new

dimension to the operation of these distinctions.

In *Cavalcade*, Coward surprised audiences and critics who had become accustomed to his witty cynicism and risqué subject matter by producing what appeared to many to be a sincerely patriotic play that respectfully mourned the death of Queen Victoria and celebrated Britain's war victories with orchestras playing "Rule Britannia" and "Land of Hope and Glory." In a series of short vignettes, Coward presents scenes from recent British history as experienced by two families, the upper-middle-class Marryots and the lower-class Bridges who begin the play as the Marryots' servants. The tableau format of *Cavalcade* was unfamiliar enough to critics that they struggled to find a suitable generic label. The critic for *Theatre World* found it "too fragmentary and kaleidoscopic" to be called "a play in the strict sense of the word" ("D. C. F."), and E. A. Baugham in *The Era* described it as "new form of drama" and "an experiment" (9). Several critics use terms such as "drama in snapshots," "spectacle" or "pageant" to describe the production. Several scenes deal with the two families' participation in and reaction to war. The Boer War sequence begins with Jane Marryot and Ellen Bridges reluctantly sending their husbands off to war and ends with public jubilation and private relief over the announcement that "Mafeking has been relieved" (135). Another sequence focuses on the Great War, beginning with Jane Marryot's bitter response to the declaration of war with Germany and ending with the devastating news of her son's death ironically juxtaposed with the wild cheers of Armistice Night. In the structure of his play, Coward often emphasizes the parallels in the Bridges' and the Marryots' responses to major historical events, but he also reveals tensions between the two classes, particularly through a romantic relationship that develops between the Marryots' son Joe and the Bridges' daughter Fanny, which is cut short by Joe's death in the Great War. As the play proceeds, the Marryots' status diminishes while the Bridges' rises, though class divisions remain intact throughout. The play ends in the year 1930 (the present), which is represented through a nightmarish conglomeration of sound and visual effects suggesting the chaos and frenzy of the contemporary world. In the final moments of the play, however, this disturbing scene dissolves into a comfortingly patriotic finale, in which the entire cast sings "God Save the King," a Union Jack flying overhead. Certain elements within the play such as Coward's somewhat superficial handling of class relations and his unexpected turn toward patriotism certainly planted the seeds for a divided response from critics, but the polarized and polarizing reception can be largely attributed to external cultural and political factors that fueled tensions between critics and produced conflicting and distorted readings of the production and its audience.

The heated response to *Cavalcade* appears to have taken Coward off guard. Coward later insisted that his aim was purely technical: seeking

to “test [his] producing powers on a large scale,” he began with the idea of a series of “tremendous mob scenes” or “mass effects” that could have been the storming of the Bastille or chariot races in Rome (Coward, *Autobiography* 231). A chance encounter with old issues of *Illustrated London News* and *Black and White* led to his decision to set the play in England and to focus on relatively recent historical events. Charles B. Cochran, an impresario and showman with whom Coward had collaborated on several revues, secured the venue with the largest seating capacity in the West End, the Drury Lane. The final production exploited and even extended the Drury Lane’s considerable technical resources, making use of six hydraulic lifts, a steam locomotive, troop ships, a giant ocean liner, and special lighting effects that required a complete reconfiguration of the footlights. Although Coward professed to have been well aware of the potential pitfalls of such large-scale technical effects—“mass effects are all very well, but . . . they should be, at best, background for a strong story” (*Autobiography* 231)—he could not have predicted the overwhelming impact the spectacle would have on the massive Drury Lane audience in his largest-scale production to date. Likewise, though he was aware that the “emotional basis of *Cavalcade* was undoubtedly music” and that “popular tunes probe the memory more swiftly than anything else” (*Autobiography* 231), he probably did not anticipate the degree to which his use of popular and patriotic melodies from the last thirty years would move his audience to tears and interfere with the detachment needed to appreciate the more critical or ironic aspects of the production. These technical decisions—the massive commercial venue, the cinematic spectacular effects, and the score made up largely of popular songs rather than original compositions—also unwittingly contributed to *Cavalcade* being judged as unapologetically emotional and patriotic, two key factors that led to its being swept up in contemporary cultural and political debates.

Melba Cuddy-Keane and Stefan Collini have provided insightful, detailed accounts of the divisive “battle of the brows” being waged in the literary periodicals and presses as well as the BBC through the late twenties and early thirties. In these battles, beleaguered intellectuals or “highbrows,” including the Woolfs and the Leavises, fought against direct attacks and perceived encroachments by self-professed “lowbrows” or “broad-brows” such as J. B. Priestley and Arnold Bennett. Publications such as Leonard Woolf’s *Hunting the Highbrow* (1927), F. R. Leavis’s *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (1930), and Q. D. Leavis’s *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932) reacted against and contributed to the tensions. The Leavises, for instance, presented the contemporary moment as a cultural crisis in which mass culture was threatening the very existence of a “minority culture” that could offer a “discerning appreciation of art and literature” and uphold the “implicit standards that order the finer living of an age” (F. R. Leavis 14). By contrast, they maintained that mass culture—including popular journal-

ism, bestsellers, and cinema—sought to profit from “man’s suggestibility as a herd animal” (Q. D. Leavis 192) by deliberately exploiting the “cheap response” (F. R. Leavis 15). Shortly after the end of *Cavalcade*’s run, in October 1932, BBC radio hosted a series of debates on the subject, including J. B. Priestley’s “To a High-Brow” and Harold Nicolson’s response, “To a Low-Brow,” which wound Virginia Woolf to the “pitch of fury” in which she wrote her essay, “Middlebrow” (Cuddy-Keane 32). The rising tensions between minority and mass culture clearly emerge in the critical response to *Cavalcade*, creating a division between popular and intellectual responses to Coward’s work that would prove difficult to surmount for decades to come.

Contemporary theatre critics seized upon Coward’s move to a larger, more populist venue as well as his shift in tone and subject matter as an opportunity to take sides in the “battle of the brows.” Despite the *Manchester Guardian*’s optimistic claim that Coward had produced a play “which must strike admiration into every height and breadth of brow” (“J. B.” n. p.), many prominent theatre critics insisted on stressing cultural divisions in the audience.<sup>3</sup> James Agate, theatre critic for the *Sunday Times*, casts the play most explicitly in terms of the “battle of the brows.” His review divides the audience into warring cultural camps, “Chelsea and Bloomsbury” (also known as “highbrows” and “hyper-aesthetes”) and “the gallery” (also known as “simple folk”). His review opens, “Chelsea and Bloomsbury, foregathering in the foyer, made no secret of the fact that this production had not their approval. Stage-pictures, they said, did not make a play; there was no wit, and such stirring of the emotions as they detected was obviously vulgar” (n. p.). In irritated tones, Agate defends Coward against this imagined “high-brow” response, noting that his aim was not to present high art, but to find a successor to the melodramas at Drury Lane that could fill 2,600 seats nine times a week for a year. Agate’s role as theatre critic for the BBC, an institution credited with creating for itself a middlebrow audience (Cuddy-Keane 18-19), may partly explain his reluctance to be seen as a “highbrow.” Agate nonetheless betrays some condescension toward the Drury Lane audience when he highlights some of the more understated scenes that he felt Coward had provided for the “peculiar satisfaction” of “Chelsea and Bloomsbury”:

All these things are first-class because they are not underlined and because Mr. Coward is writing here for a section of his audience which can take things in. But the gallery at Drury Lane is a long way off, and subtlety runs the risk of becoming mere ineffectiveness. A precious Strachey-esque account of the last thirty years would be one good thing; bound volumes of the illustrated papers of the period are another. And it is the second sort of good thing which Mr. Coward has achieved with

something like genius. (n. p.)

Ivor Brown, writing in *The Observer*, also applauded Coward's shift from appealing to a limited, coterie audience to a broader, less insular one: "no longer the darling of the parish; he . . . has stepped out among the multitude" (n. p.). Like Agate, Brown disparages potential critics of such a move: "[O]f course there is the man who will not like it, but he is merely the corner-boy of culture who wants to pen up art in his own little niche and say, 'What a wise boy am I'" ("Genius" n. p.). Hostility toward the "highbrow" is even more palpable in Franklin Morris's review in *The Bystander*: "I believe there are some silly-superior people who are lamenting that their Noël has fallen from grace. They miss in the vast spaces of Drury Lane the smart and witty chatter about a set that is not really smart or witty at all" (170). Such views would have been influential, as the *Sunday Times* and *The Observer* held the greatest "critical authority" in Britain at this time (Bingham 57).

The extent to which the "battle of the brows" had infiltrated theatre criticism is evident in these reviews, which appear to be deliberately fanning the flames through their characterizations of an imagined "highbrow" response from which they pointedly distance themselves. Janice Radway has observed that the antagonism between middlebrow and highbrow runs in both directions, with middlebrow readers and institutions often defining themselves against intellectual or academic ways of reading and showing "skepticism about the secular religion of high culture" (206). The resistance to intellectual ways of reading that Radway finds in the American Book-of-the-Month Club in the 1980s was also present in England in the 1920s; both F. R. and Q. D. Leavis complain of similar resistances to high culture in the Book Guild and the Book Society (Collini 116-17). Indeed, as Collini notes, antagonism toward "highbrows" was prevalent in mainstream British media in the late twenties and early thirties. In 1927, Leonard Woolf described the highbrow as "an extremely unpopular person" who was being hunted "in the Press and in the atmosphere" (5), and in 1932, Aldous Huxley observed that "highbrow" had become "a term of contemptuous abuse" (qtd. in Collini 115). The reception of *Cavalcade* confirms these impressions through theatre critics' eagerness to distance themselves from "highbrow" spectators and to align themselves with the popular audience response. The notoriously confrontational Irish playwright Sean O'Casey was one of very few self-professed "highbrows" to fight back: he proclaimed the play "a tawdry piece of work, a halfpenny-worth of bread to an intolerable deal of sack" and lambasted Agate for attempting to silence the "buzzing coterie of highbrows" that criticized the play, insisting that "the intellectual one per cent among the people have always and will always, whether Mr Agate likes it or not, decide the fate of a play" (93). Although O'Casey's essay was published in *Time and Tide* in 1936, well after the play's initial run, it provoked enough furore that the editor, Lady Rhondda, refused two follow-up pieces,

which O'Casey eventually published under the title "Coward Codology" in his collection *The Flying Wasp* (Murray 244).

The cultural divide in the reception of *Cavalcade* was not merely a reaction to Coward's movement toward a more commercial style of theatre aimed at a broader audience. Just a few years earlier, in 1928, his popular revue, *This Year of Grace*, which ran at the London Pavillion for 315 performances, garnered high praise from across the cultural spectrum. By this time, revues—comic variety shows surveying contemporary events in a series of sketches, songs, dance numbers, and burlesques—had evolved into spectacular extravaganzas housed in lavish "palace[s] of variety" (Mander 25-26). As Lawrence Rainey notes, revues from the interwar period were no longer aimed at "the working and lower middle classes that had formerly filled the [music] halls, but rather an emerging group of suburban consumers who rejected equally the 'low vulgarity' of the popular halls and the contemplative ethos of traditional, autonomous, or 'high' art" (3). *This Year of Grace* is comprised of sketches that lightly satirize certain aspects of contemporary British life, including jazz dancing, sexual freedom, and middle-class conventionality. Despite its obvious commercial appeal to middle-class audiences, Coward's revue was very well received by a wide range of critics, several of whom praised him for his ability to infuse spectacle with keen social satire, an element that had largely disappeared from revues by this time (Hoare, *Noël* 192). The revue brought together Virginia Woolf and Arnold Bennett, often at odds in their tastes: Woolf wrote Coward to say that some numbers "struck me on the forehead like a bullet . . . works of art in short" (*Letters* 3: 478), while Bennett—much to the amusement of his fellow critics—judged it "by a long way the most distinguished revue in my not inconsiderable experience" (793). St. John Ervine, writing in the *London Observer*, declared it the best revue "anywhere in the world," playfully elaborating with an alphabetized string of superlatives, from "the most amusing, the most brilliant, the cleverest" to "the most uberous, the most versatile, the wittiest" (qtd. in Morley 125). In *Time and Tide*, the feminist playwright Christopher St. John praised his "profound psychological insight," and *The Daily Mail*, *The Tatler*, *The Royal Magazine*, *The Dancing Times*, and *Women's Whirl* all published highly favorable reviews, suggesting that Coward's play found favor with a variety of critics.<sup>4</sup>

In assessing the cultural impact of this revue in *The Long Weekend*, Robert Graves and Alan Hodge have no difficulty linking Coward with major modernist writers despite his mainstream appeal: "Coward was the dramatist of disillusion, as Eliot was its tragic poet, Aldous Huxley its novelist, and James Joyce its prose epic-writer" (136). The parallel with Eliot, at least, is not entirely far-fetched: echoes of *Prufrock* and *The Waste Land* can be found in several sketches, including "Mary Make-Believe," about an anxious, introspective modern girl whose "indecisions quite prevent her vi-

sions coming true,” and “Lorelei,” about a distressed Rhine maiden who has lost her power to lure men in the “coal dust and grime” of the modern world, from which “Glamour has gone / From the schooners once ranged about” (Coward, *This Year* 10, 23-24). At this point in his career, Coward did not seem so far away from the writers now associated with modernism in spite of his popularity with a large middle-class audience. The different critical responses to *This Year of Grace* and *Cavalcade* can be partly explained by differences in the plays themselves: the social satire and tone of disillusionment in *This Year of Grace* had far more in common with modernist writing than did the nostalgia and tentative patriotism of *Cavalcade*. However, the intensification of the “battle of the brows” and the political tensions surrounding the General Election of 1931 were largely responsible for fueling the cultural animosity that characterized the reception of *Cavalcade* and for preventing the kind of appreciation across cultural and class divisions that Coward experienced with *This Year of Grace* just a few years earlier.

Several reviews characterized *Cavalcade* as resoundingly patriotic, thereby linking the play to the immediate political situation. The *Daily Mail* heartily congratulated Coward for writing “a magnificent play in which the note of national pride pervading every scene and every sentence must make each of us face the future with courage and high hopes” (Parsons n. p.), while *The Tatler* described *Cavalcade* as “one of the most stirring, patriotic, bugle-blowing Kiplingesque, Red White and Blue evenings ever devised, lock stock and barrel, by a theatrical genius” ([Anon.] Rev. in *The Tatler*, n. p.). Such reviews resonated with the Conservative election campaign, which the *New York Times* described as taking place “amid the loudest drumbeats of patriotism heard in England since the war” (Kuhn n. p.). Although, as critic Ivor Brown pointed out, *Cavalcade* was “in rehearsal weeks before the word ‘National’ sent the voters cavalcading to the polls” (“Genius” n. p.), Coward’s patriotic tone was widely credited for bolstering pro-Tory sentiment by invoking “the sentimental charm, the belief in progress, and the patriotism of the Victorian age” (Graves and Hodge 385). George V and Queen Mary’s visit to the theatre in the wake of the General Election only reinforced the impression of Coward’s fervent patriotism. As the *Telegraph* described the occasion, the large crowds that gathered outside and inside the theatre gave voice to “[a]ll the pent-up emotions of a sorely-trying nation—joy and relief that a crisis had been faced and passed, loyalty to the Crown, love for the King and their family as typical of all that the race holds dear” (Dixon n. p.).

Though *Cavalcade* does sound some patriotic notes, its reception as an unambiguously, even fervently patriotic play is surprising; the text of the play is considerably more conflicted in its patriotism than its reception would suggest. As Coward presents it, the recent history of England is inextricably bound to war: eleven of the twenty-one scenes deal with war



or its aftermath, and the war scenes focus almost entirely on the toll of war on the principal woman characters, Jane Marryot and Ellen Bridges, whose responses consistently serve to cast doubt on militaristic and imperial ideals associated with patriotism. As Christopher Innes aptly notes, “[p]rivate values repeatedly undercut public beliefs” through the tension Coward sets up between the “grandiose pageant of history” and the pain of individual families (243-44). In the first scene, for instance, Ellen Bridges questions her husband’s decision to fight in the Boer War:

ELLEN: What’s the war for, anyhow? Nobody wanted to ‘ave a war.

ALFRED: We’ve got to ‘ave wars every now and then to prove we’re top dog—

ELLEN: This one don’t seem to be proving much.

(116)

Alfred’s defense of the British position is hardly persuasive, and his further attempts to convince Ellen of the need to go to war are feeble and ultimately unsuccessful. Nationalist rhetoric in this play almost never goes unchallenged, and even patriotic music is often presented in a critical light. At the end of the third scene, Jane Marryot, whose worries about her husband’s war service are aggravated by her children’s eager participation in war games, snaps when a barrel organ plays “Soldiers of the Queen” under her window: “Go on, then—play louder—play louder! Soldiers of the Queen—wounded and dying and suffering for the Queen! Play louder, play louder!” (128). Her outburst gives way to hysterical laughter, anger, then tears. The subsequent scene lampoons a popular turn-of-the-century musical in which a “[s]extette of ample girls” in uniform sing a jubilant propaganda song: “And we’re out for a lark and a spree / In our uniforms so stunning / We shall soon have Kruger running / From the girls of the C. I. V.” (129). The scene is clearly a burlesque, with its “*excessively rural*” (129) setting, ridiculous plot, and vacuous lyrics, but at least one reviewer suspected that much of the original audience took it seriously (“P. P.” n. p.).

The episodes dealing with the Great War likewise reflect Coward’s ambivalence about patriotism in its connection to militarism. As the Marryot family awaits news of the declaration of war, Robert Marryot cautions his young son not to be “too impulsive and patriotic and dashing” (164). Once war is declared, as crowds gather outside to sing the Marseillaise and Rule Britannia, Jane Marryot refuses to share a drink with her husband and son with a bitter, almost overtly anti-nationalist speech: “Drink to the war, then, if you want to. I’m not going to. I can’t! Rule Britannia! Send us victorious, happy and glorious! Drink, Joey, you’re only a baby, still, but you’re old enough for war. Drink like the Germans are drinking, to Victory and Defeat, and stupid, tragic sorrow” (166). A parallel scene later in the play, in which Jane Marryot toasts “the Future of England” on New Year’s Eve, 1929, was

often cited in reviews as an unambiguous example of Coward's patriotism:

Now, then, let's couple the Future of England with the past of England. The glories and victories and triumphs that are over, and the sorrows that are over too. Let's drink to our sons who made part of the pattern and to our hearts that died with them. Let's drink to the spirit of gallantry and courage that made a strange Heaven out of unbelievable Hell, and let's drink to the hope that one day this country of ours, which we love so much, will find dignity and greatness and peace again. (177-78)

Though certainly more hopeful than the earlier speech about Germany, this toast is considerably more tentative in its patriotism than most reviews would suggest. While on the one hand the speech celebrates England's "glories and victories and triumphs" and upholds its "spirit of gallantry and courage," it links those qualities inextricably with sorrow and death, which are "part of the pattern," and holds them responsible for distorting "unbelievable Hell" into "a strange Heaven." The "dignity and greatness" for which Jane Marryot yearns is located in a vague, hypothetical future, and the episode that immediately follows suggests that England at the present moment is a long way from "dignity and greatness." After a short blackout, the scene changes to one that Coward describes as "CHAOS" (114), set in a nightclub in which people dance without enjoyment to one of the few original songs Coward wrote for the production, "Twentieth Century Blues," which begins: "Why is it that civilized humanity / Must make the world so wrong?" (178). The fact that so few critics recognized the ambivalence of Coward's patriotism and his critique of militarism suggests the extent to which the political climate influenced the play's reception.

The boom in memoirs, novels, and films dealing with the Great War in the years immediately preceding *Cavalcade* may also have contributed to the impression of its patriotism. Much of the war writing produced in the late 1920s and early 1930s was characterized by a tone of disillusionment and dealt with the futility of war (Hynes 439, Bracco 76). By the time *Cavalcade* was produced in late 1931, the bitterness and skepticism expressed by some of its characters might have seemed tame compared to works by Sassoon, Owen, Graves, and others, and thus its potential for critique may have been diluted. Like many other works of the 1920s and 1930s, *Cavalcade* is ambivalent about war rather than being explicitly anti-war, and as Rosa Maria Bracco has noted in her study of middlebrow novels and plays of the period, such ambivalence allowed critics to interpret these works in conflicting ways, as supporting both pro- and anti-war ideologies (Bond 29, 35; Bracco 185, 188). *Cavalcade's* ambivalent stance toward patriotism and militarism likewise allowed critics to see the play as supporting whatever

political position they wanted or expected to find in the play.

Coward's choice of venue likely influenced critics' insistence on seeing the play as unambiguously patriotic. Since the nineteenth century, the Drury Lane had been known as "theatrical purveyor of the patriotic and the jingoistic, the presenter of huge and colorful images of popular social and political taste, the illustrator of the new imperialism" (Booth 5). By the 1920s, however, its status as England's national theatre was threatened, as the dominance of commercial interests led its managers to import a series of musical comedies from America (Dobbs 180). Thus enthusiastic English critics heralded *Cavalcade* as a welcome return of an English production to that stage. As the critic for *Theatre World* put it, Coward's "brilliant historical pageant in which the true spirit of England breathes and the real national character is revealed" allowed Drury Lane to reclaim "its rightful place as our National Theatre" ("D. C. F." n. p.).

While many reviewers congratulated Coward for bolstering national spirit at a time of crisis, his apparent partisanship alienated some intellectuals of his day. Their response reflects the contemporary tension between patriotism and intellectualism noted by Collini, who observes that in the interwar period, British intellectuals were often cast as foreign or un-patriotic (126, 131). Conversely, as Leonard Woolf suggests, "lowbrows" were assumed to be more patriotic: "When I open a paper or listen-in I am continually told that we are all much better fellows—more honest, and clean, and happy, and wise, and English—for being low-brows" (5). The intellectual condemnation of *Cavalcade* would only have reinforced this impression of highbrow animosity toward patriotism. Ethel Mannin and Sean O'Casey were particularly vitriolic in their condemnation of the play's politics. In a review titled "A Play which Makes Me Rage"—published in *The New Leader* late in the play's run with a prominent disclaimer that the author "expresses her own views for which the Editor does not take responsibility"—Mannin describes *Cavalcade* as the "dangerous and abominable beginning" of "a popular revival of that same jingoism which drapes a Union Jack round social injustices and perpetuates the spirit of war" by "sentimentalizing . . . something unspeakably dreadful" and by "omit[ing] [nothing] that might be calculated to bring a sob to every throat and to stir the pulse of patriotic fervour" (7). Mannin tenaciously returns to the subject six years later in *Women and the Revolution*: "Only a society 'bound and delivered over' to the class order could tolerate . . . [t]he flag-wagging, royalty-adulating Imperialism of such a spectacle" (265). O'Casey likewise takes Coward to task for his cheap patriotism and superficial treatment of history, describing the play as "but the march-past of the hinder parts of England, her backside draped with a Union Jack" (89). The vituperative tone of these essays provides some indication of the heated political circumstances of the play's reception.

Coward's apparent endorsement of the dominant Conservative, patriotic politics not only hurt his reputation with some prominent intellectuals of his day, but also likely affected his subsequent reputation. In *History and Value*, Frank Kermode argues that literature that achieves permanence tends to be transgressive, especially when it works against frontiers such as sex and class; conversely, acquiescence to class ideology can interfere with the permanence or value of a book (22). Certainly, scholars in recent decades have tended to value work that is politically transgressive, and this play has been neglected in recent re-evaluations of Coward's work, which have largely focused on those of his plays that open themselves to queer readings.<sup>5</sup>

In later accounts of *Cavalcade's* reception, Coward repeatedly expressed frustration that "everybody seemed to be more concerned with *Cavalcade* as a patriotic appeal than as a play" (*Autobiography* 239). This discomfort with the play's apparent patriotism emerged only retrospectively, however. On opening night, Coward gave a spontaneous curtain speech in which he stated, "I hope that this play has made you feel that, in spite of the troublous times we are living in, it is still pretty exciting to be English," and he initially defended his impulsive patriotism in a letter to a friend: "You know me well enough to know that when I stammered about it being pretty exciting to be English, I meant every naïve word. We're a strange race and we persist in getting a lot of things wrong but we do have our hearts in the right place" (*Letters* 262, 183). Later, however, he dismissed the speech in his private correspondence as "an outburst of faintly theatrical patriotism" (*Letters* 341), and in the introduction to a 1933 collection of his plays, he was eager to distance himself from the impression of partisanship:

I was told, on all sides, that I had done 'a big thing' and that a Peerage was the least I could expect from a grateful monarch. I was also congratulated upon my uncanny shrewdness in slapping on a strong patriotic play two weeks before a general election, which was bound to result in a sweeping Conservative majority. (Here, I must regretfully admit, that during rehearsals I was so very much occupied in the theatre, and, as usual, so bleakly uninterested in politics, that I had not the remotest idea until a few days before production that there was going to be an election at all. However, there was, and its effect on the box-office was considerable.) (ix)

In the wake of all the media attention for his patriotism, Coward's professed apolitical stance and his insistence that he did not have "one moment to waste on patriotic fervor" must have come as a shock to those who had admired the play for its patriotism. Still later, in the first volume of his auto-

biography published in 1937, Coward overtly condemned critics' distortion of the play, its transformation into "A message to the youth of the Nation" and "A Call to Arms" which glossed over "the irony of the war scenes" (*Autobiography* 240).<sup>6</sup> Coward's later attempts to distance himself from his earlier patriotism suggest that he came to recognize that an association with jingoism or political partisanship could potentially harm his reputation.

While the irony of the war scenes is readily apparent to readers of *Cavalcade*, in production these more restrained moments of critique seem to have been overwhelmed by spectacular visual and sound effects, especially in the play's finale. The final nightclub scene ends with a series of disturbing images and disorienting sound effects invoking the turbulence of the present day, ending with the stage direction: "*Noise grows louder and louder. Steam rivets, loud speakers, jazz bands, aeroplane propellers, etc, until the general effect is complete chaos*" (179). However, as this cacophonous scene "*fades into darkness and silence*," Coward introduces another, contrasting image: "*away at the back a Union Jack glows through the blackness. . . . [T]he lights slowly come up and the whole stage is composed of massive tiers, upon which stand the entire Company. The Union Jack flies over their heads as they sing 'God Save the King'*" (180). This type of heavy-handed special effect was likely encouraged by the sheer size of the Drury Lane theatre, whose "monster stage" required a "bold and sweeping . . . treatment," as a reviewer noted in 1886 (qtd. in Booth 5). Not surprisingly, this scene was the one that most divided critics, and even some of Coward's supporters felt he had gone too far with this lavish display of patriotism. Desmond McCarthy, for instance, in a largely sympathetic review—one of the few that recognized that "the pervading sentiment is pacifist"—found the final scene "patriotic in the dangerous sense" (576). Recent critics continue to disagree about the ending: Jean Chothia sees it as an "astoundingly blithe conclusion" (105), whereas Christopher Innes reads it as "more ambiguous than the original audiences assumed" (246). Despite the more ambivalent presentation of patriotism up to this point, the final scene does imply that renewed faith in God, King, and country will somehow miraculously overcome the myriad of problems facing the contemporary world. This final moment exemplifies a problem that John Lahr identifies in many of Coward's endings, whereby he seeks to appease his audience by finding "the middle way between truth and applause" (25). Coward ultimately regretted the finale, describing it as "theatrically effective jingoism" in which his "redundant theatre sense over-stepp[ed] the mark a bit" (*Autobiography* 240). He recognized that this ending was partly responsible for critics' insistence on his patriotism, though he maintained that the quiet dignity of other scenes ought to have helped to balance it (*Autobiography* 240). His comments betray a concern about the role of spectacle in this production.

Christopher Innes argues that *Cavalcade's* reputation has suf-

ferred due to the “automatic assumption that spectacle overwhelms sense” (243). While it may be possible to stage the play so that spectacle would not overcome critical engagement, the response to the original production attests to the overpowering nature of the spectacular effects in the Drury Lane Theatre. Critics for the *Daily Express* and the *Sunday Pictorial* both described the spectacle as “overwhelming” (“The Drama Critic” n. p.; Farjeon n. p.), while A. E. Wilson observed that the production’s “lavishness and variety confuse[d] the mind” (n. p.). The reviewer from *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* compared the show to an avalanche that “gathers speed and in the end overwhelms us, so that at the final fall of the curtain the auditorium looked like a devastated area crowded with weeping women and shaken men” ([Anon.], Rev. in *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* n. p.). Ivor Brown found that Coward’s “amazing piece of stage-craft” and “the magic of [his] mass-manoeuvres” caused the mind to be “surfeited and staggered and sent reeling” (“1899” n. p.). Such responses suggest that spectacle did overwhelm sense for many reviewers.

Critics admitted to being overcome not only by the impressive technical effects but also by emotion. In *Cavalcade*, Coward relies on emotion rather than intellect to convey the often painful effects of historical events on individuals. While some scenes, such as the one in which Edward Marryot and his new bride profess their love aboard the Titanic, seem calculated to elicit a straightforward emotional response, others, such as the one in which Jane Marryot joins the Armistice Day celebrations “cheering wildly, with the tears rolling down her face” (174) as she remembers the death of her son, are more complex and potentially critical in their use of emotion. Coward even goes so far as to critique the media’s exploitation of painful emotions in his song, “Twentieth Century Blues”: “The Press headline—every sorrow, / Blues value is News value to-morrow” (178). The potential for critique through emotion, however, seems not to have been realized in the original production, perhaps because the audience was still too close to the events represented. Several reviewers confessed that they were so moved by the production that they found themselves incapable of passing judgment. John Connell, for instance, began his review in *The Isis* by admitting he was unable to view the play “dispassionately” and instead simply recorded his own emotional response: “After a little I forgot to cry. I just sat being more and more moved. The big, vague emotions rushed irresistibly though me—pity, admiration, tenderness, love” (12). The critic for the *Morning Post* is even more explicit about his critical faculties being overcome by “bare, unspoilt and real” emotion: “Is “Cavalcade” a good play? I simply do not know. Is it a good entertainment? Again, I do not know. But has it the quality of something bigger and more important than the best of entertainment can be? It most assuredly has” (“W. F.” n. p.). Emotional responses such as these have implications for our understand-

ing of cultural distinctions. Pierre Bourdieu argues that distance is one of the key factors in distinguishing between “popular” and “legitimate” tastes: whereas the “cultural nobility” privileges aesthetic distance, the “popular ‘aesthetic’” favors participation, identification, and investment (5, 16, 33). Similarly, Janice Radway characterizes middlebrow readers as privileging the “visceral pleasures of being immersed” and seeking to experience the “sensuous, profoundly emotional experience of being captured by a book” (10, 13). According to such measures, interwar critics’ emotional responses to *Cavalcade* would have indirectly classed the play as middlebrow or even lowbrow entertainment.

Perhaps in an effort not to alienate their middlebrow readership, however, some of the more intellectual theatre critics unexpectedly defend *Cavalcade*’s emotional appeal. Their responses stand in sharp contrast to the “highbrow” dismissal of vulgar emotions anticipated by Agate and others. J. T. Grein, an early supporter of Ibsen and Shaw, writes, “We were not ashamed of our pent-up emotions pouring from moistened eyes. . . . Only a blasé or supercilious person could witness this vibrating pageant of events without feeling that it has a deeper meaning than to amuse, than to demonstrate the possibilities of the stage, and to offer a forcible rebuff to the kinema in life and blood” (688). Desmond McCarthy, closely associated with the Bloomsbury Group, describes the play as “modern in method, old-fashioned in pathos” and confesses that “the elderly man-about-town already feels he may soon be compelled, in spite of laughing, to use his handkerchief; and I, too, though I was never one of them, anticipate that it will not be at all difficult to lead me presently to the fountain of easy tears” (576). McCarthy uses the occasion to launch a defense of pathos: “One of the drawbacks from which the modern author suffers is that he addresses a public the cleverer portion of which think it vulgar to weep. The pathos of *Cavalcade* is legitimate and popular and often admirable—though the last tableau was too thick for me” (576). Both of these critics travelled in elite intellectual and artistic circles, but they are careful to distance themselves from the “clever,” “blasé,” or “supercilious” members of the audience who find such emotional responses to be “vulgar,” betraying an anxiety about being perceived as “highbrow” in the current cultural climate.

J. T. Grein’s comment about the “forcible rebuff to the kinema” introduces yet another factor in the reception of *Cavalcade* and its relationship to the “battle of the brows.” In this period, film was widely regarded as a serious threat to theatre as increasing numbers of theatres were closed or converted by property investors into cinemas (Gale, “London” 154; Cochrane 71). Critics of *Cavalcade* show considerable concern that a “highbrow” stance against pathos might further endanger the theatre, which could not afford to lose its popular appeal. Francis Toye, the music critic for the *Morning Post*, saw Coward’s appeal to the emotions as an attempt to reach the same

audience that enjoyed cinema:

Superior people may turn up their noses at what they please to call the sentimentality of the cinema, but simple people do feel like that, and the theatre has decayed because it did not dare to deal in sentimental realities, crude as they may be. After all, . . . the theatre is a comparatively crude medium in which lies both its strength and its weakness—and the efforts of sophisticated or merely anaemic intellectuals to change its fundamental quality have only succeeded in reducing its importance. (n. p.)

One can detect in Toye's disparagement of the imagined highbrow response an anxiety that such responses may mean the end of the theatre altogether. In sharp contrast to "highbrows" such as F. R. Leavis who expressed concern about the "potent influence" of cinema, whose audience "surrender[s], under conditions of hypnotic receptivity, to the cheapest emotional appeals" (15), most theatre critics congratulated Coward for making use of cinematic techniques to enhance *Cavalcade's* appeal to a mass audience. Franklin Morris in *The Bystander*, for instance, praised Coward's decision to emphasize spectacle and melodrama and "to add nothing incomprehensible or clever-clever" as a wise concession to the unrefined tastes of the Drury Lane audience: "When a patient has been fed on slops for a period it is risky, as well as wasteful, suddenly to give him lobster thermidor" (171). At a time when British popular theatre was thought to be threatened by American musicals on the one hand and popular cinema on the other, theatre critics felt the need to defend Coward's use of sentiment and patriotism to reach a wider popular audience.

The critical debates over *Cavalcade's* pathos, its patriotism, and its commercial appeal all resonate with the contemporary "battle of the brows" taking place in other media, but one aspect of these debates becomes magnified in the context of live theatre: the role of the audience. Cultural distinctions almost always involve characterizations of readers, listeners, or spectators and their imagined or projected responses. For instance, as Erica Brown and Mary Grover remark in their introduction to *Middlebrow Literary Cultures*, middlebrow "has been defined through its consumers, argued to be members of the anathematized lower middle class" (1). In the theatre, the presence of a live audience whose responses can be directly observed and characterized by critics—many of them on the same (opening) night—demonstrates perhaps even more clearly than in other media how audience reactions can be manipulated to suit the needs of the critic. The conflicting readings of Coward's audience support John Carey's observation that "mass" is an imaginary construct that can be shaped at will by the imaginer (23), though the intent in the reviews cited here is not always



to “preserve the intellectual’s seclusion from the ‘mass’” (Carey i)—often quite the reverse. As may already be evident, theatre critics characterized the massive Drury Lane audience in varied and conflicting ways, positioning themselves in the “battle of the brows” through their relationship to the rest of the audience. While a few critics distanced themselves from the audience by characterizing it as an unthinking, herd-like mass, the majority sought to align themselves with the popular audience—and in so doing, perhaps with a wider readership—by disparaging an imagined coterie of “supercilious,” “anaemic,” “highbrow” spectators who look down on patriotism, spectacle, and pathos. This tendency can be observed in several of the above-cited critics, and Coward himself echoes this language in his introduction to the published text when he characterizes the disapproving “highbrows” as effeminate or childlike in their “shrill small voices” (Introduction ix).

In contrast to those critics who insisted on cultural divisions in the audience, others emphasized its unity. Several of these responses fall in line with Elin Diamond’s observation that theatre critics often “project [their] subjective impressions and analyses on all members of a theatre audience,” offering a “fictitious but powerful sense of community that buttresses but also conceals the narcissistic claims of the critic” (404). Harris Deans, for example, represents the audience as a cohesive body unified through their emotional response to the performance: “Had the audience not been deeply moved it would have resented this attempt on its emotions. But we had been moved, and we stumbled to our feet like one man.” Likewise, *The Bystander* emphasizes the power of emotion and patriotism to unite across class and gender differences: “duchesses and commoners stood up in the finale and sang the National Anthem, with tears streaming down the faces of beautiful women, while men stood grimly to attention and swallowed hard” ([Anon.]). John Connell singles out one typical audience member to characterize the unified audience response:

I found myself . . . profoundly and painfully stirred, in the right way to the right kind of patriotism. I wanted to cry, and gulped back the tears; I felt outrageously proud and absurdly brave, terribly sad unbelievably happy [*sic.*]. I think I would have cried outright if the woman next to me had not borrowed my handkerchief. She was middle-aged and richly expansive in a physical way; she was prosperously and gloriously English middle-class—fur coat, small felt hat, scent, bridge-parties, cigarette-holder, ‘Times’ Book Club, and all. She cried very soon; at first she said, ‘Oh God!’; then she said ‘Oh dear!’; then she just sniffed. In the darkness I held out a large white handkerchief,

and she took it and muttered that she hoped I understood. I think I did. . . .

Always I found that personal implication in the general theme, as I suppose did the crying lady beside me and everyone else in that capacious theatre. It was, to each of us, a part of our experience, and we found a unity in our suffering and our achievement. (12)

For Connell, the production bridged the gap not only between genders and classes but also between the middle-class lady's middlebrow tastes and his own presumably more discriminating palate. Such expressions of unity may reflect these critics' nostalgia for a less acrimonious cultural climate in which it was still possible for a popular theatrical production to bridge cultural divisions, as was the case with Coward's *This Year of Grace* just a few years earlier.

The unified audience response was characterized quite differently by highbrow critics who read unity as conformity and evidence of the production's emotionally manipulative effect on the audience. These critics' concerns about audience passivity mirror those of the modernist theatre practitioner and playwright Bertolt Brecht, whose Alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) was developed around this time to counteract spectators' trance-like passivity in the face of "vague but profound sensations," which he felt transformed them into "a cowed, credulous, hypnotized mass" (188). Sean O'Casey stressed the cult-like response to the production, which "floodlighted the minds of the critics and the people with exultation" and gave rise to a "loud hallelujah of praise" (89). Beverley Nichols, troubled that the production was "hailed with hysterical delight by the whole middle class of England" (qtd. in Cannon 171) accused Coward of "pander[ing] to the middle classes and their unthinking patriotism" (Hoare, *Noël* 236). Ethel Mannin emphasized the audience's herdlike nature, criticizing Coward for exploiting a "hysterical, sentimental, mob-feeling which passes as 'patriotism'" ("Play" 7). She too made use of representative types: while she was not surprised that "the fat, white, bejeweled and befurred women" in the more expensive seats enjoyed the play, she was dismayed that "the gallery, where one expects to find intelligent people, loves it just as much as the stalls," concluding that these workers, not yet enlightened by Socialism, had been "gulled by jingoism . . . into an unquestioning acceptance of mental attitudes and sentiments which are opposed to their best interests" ("Play" 7). These differing characterizations of the Drury Lane audience for *Cavalcade* demonstrate how critics constructed audiences not only to bolster their own judgments of the play but also to support their position within the "battle of the brows."

The reception of *Cavalcade* demonstrates that theatre and theatre

criticism played a significant role in the culture wars waged in Britain in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Not only was the “battle of the brows” an important factor in the distorted reception of the play, but the critical response to *Cavalcade* also contributed to rising cultural tensions. Before *Cavalcade*, Coward did not show much concern about cultural divisions in his audience, but simply sought to reach as wide an audience as he could—a necessary concern when writing for a massive venue like the Drury Lane. Through its combination of spectacular visual effects, emotionally resonant music, understated scenes, and critique of militarism, *Cavalcade* seems calculated to appeal to spectators from across a broad cultural spectrum. However, it failed to do so, as critics used the play to take sides in the “battle of the brows,” affirming their own position in the cultural debates through conflicting and self-serving characterizations of the production and its audience. Most professional theatre critics reviewing *Cavalcade* self-consciously aligned themselves with the popular audience, often by admitting to sharing their emotional response to the play, and carefully distanced themselves from the disapproving minority, whose snobbery they described in disparaging terms. Those who denounced the play, on the other hand, deplored its trancelike effect on the mass audience and called for a more discriminating and critical response. Both supporters and detractors contributed to a shift in Coward's reputation from that of a playwright able to traverse cultural boundaries to one whose politics, sentimentality, and emphasis on spectacle were definitively *not* “highbrow.” Coward's expulsion from the cultural category of highbrow helped to bolster the popular appeal of the original production of *Cavalcade*, but it damaged his reputation with intellectuals and academics for decades. Coward's diminished status in the second half of the twentieth century is usually attributed to his rejection by the Angry Young Men of the 1950s, but his fall from favor likely had its roots earlier, in the “battle of the brows” waged over *Cavalcade*.

### Notes

1. Woolf withheld the essay from publication since it was too obviously written in anger, but it was posthumously published in *Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. Melba Cuddy-Keane provides a thoughtful analysis of this essay and the cultural debates that produced it in *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual and the Public Sphere*. Stefan Collini also helps to place Woolf's essay in the context of the “battle of the brows” in *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*.
2. Among the many sources dealing at least in part with mainstream or popular theatre of the interwar period in Britain are Maggie B. Gale's *West End Women*; Roger Wilmut's *Kindly Leave the Stage!*; Leslie Smith's *Modern British Farce*; and several essays in *British Theatre Between the Wars, 1918-1939* edited by Clive Barker and Maggie B. Gale. Two essays in

*Cambridge History of British Theatre*, Sophie Nield's "Popular Theatre, 1895-1940" and Maggie Gale's "The London Stage, 1918-1945," make passing reference to tensions between high and low culture or aesthetic and commercial interests in this period, but neither deals specifically with the "battle of the brows" and its impact on theatre. In the American context, David Savran's *Highbrow/Lowdown* examines more thoroughly the relationship between jazz and the cultural stratification that emerged in America theatre in the 1920s.

3. Most reviews of *Cavalcade* cited in this essay were accessed in scrapbooks held in the Noël Coward Archive, Special Collections, Birmingham Library, Section D, Presscuttings Box 5. Because these articles were clipped out of their original context, page numbers are rarely available and exact publication dates are sometimes missing.

4. Reviews from these sources were part of the Noël Coward clippings file and an unattributed scrapbook on *This Year of Grace* held in the Theatre Archive at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

5. Recent queer readings of Coward include Philip Hoare's "It's All a Question of Masks"; Penny Farfan's "Noël Coward and Sexual Modernism: *Private Lives* as Queer Comedy"; Alan Sinfield's *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century*; and Terry Castle's *Noël Coward and Radclyffe Hall: Kindred Spirits*.

6. Although, as Coward suggests, most critics did not recognize the ironic aspects of *Cavalcade*, E. A. Baughan, St. John Ervine and the *Christian World* critic did notice a satirical or pessimistic vein running through the pageant.

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