

THE CENSORING OF *THE GINGER MAN*, LONDON AND
DUBLIN 1959, OR, THE “NIPPLE NUTTINESS”
OF J. P. DONLEAVY

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For the collected edition of his plays, first published in 1972, J. P. Donleavy presented a long, and memorable, dedication that displayed the licence that writers could by then presume to enjoy. “To all those fuckpigs of multiplicities who have attempted to molest and denigrate these plays” he triumphantly declares, “who tried to stop or shift them off the stage, who used them unfairly as steps to stardom and bigger contracts, who panned them, who hated them, who coughed during the tender moments, who left before the final curtain, or came late for the first, and not least, to those who don’t know they exist, I hereby dedicate the contents which still bring me and mine so much gold” (Donleavy, 1972: vii)¹.

Of course, the rude panache of this dedication congratulates us all for not being included in any of these categories of “fuckpig”; for being enlightened and unshockable. But it also offers an enticement that draws our attention to a complex field of interaction: between fictional and actual trespass; between the thematics of theatrical works and the social forces at play during their performance; between writing and reception. The tone of this scabrous salute is intentionally resonant with the tirades of Donleavy’s most celebrated anti-hero Sebastian Balfe Dangerfield, the central figure of *The Ginger Man* who, hung-over and harangued by his wife as “a nasty blighter”, cries out “Call me bugger, I can’t stand the gentility on top of the yelling” (Donleavy, 1961: 60). The emphatic preference for the honesty of obscenity identifies both book and the play as acts of defiance in keeping with his central character’s incurable rebellions.

¹ I am grateful to Helen Ryan, who performed in the 1976 production of *The Ginger Man* at the Shaw Theatre, London, for turning my attention to the play and its dedication. Her personal copy (Donleavy, 1974: 5) carries the note added in Donleavy’s own hand: “and to Helen Ryan who is not one of the above, but is certainly the most splendid of Miss Frosts”.

As also openly acknowledged in the dedication, the “gold” *The Ginger Man* had brought was tied up with its notoriety, its fame with its infamy. The reputation of the play remains defined by its short exposure to Dublin audiences in the autumn of 1959, when its expected two-week run at the Gaiety Theatre was cancelled after only three controversial nights. And it is a reputation which Donleavy has unabashedly amplified, prefacing all editions of the play text from its first publication in 1961, with a framing account of its short run: *What They Did in Dublin with “The Ginger Man”: A Play*². Unusually, therefore, any treatment of the reception of this play must acknowledge that its significance has already been carefully mediated by the author himself. His is a tale of the uncompromising dramatist, borne up by a close community of like-minded bohemians. It boasts Brendan Behan and Patrick Kavanagh rallying in close support, while the city itself is characterized in windswept repression and refusal: “A cold misty rain was descending, mottling all the empty shop windows down Grafton Street. Trinity College sat baleful with its great iron gates [...] Fallen leaves staining the way ahead. For Dame Street is a haunted road” (Donleavy, 1961: 6).

What They Did in Dublin travels again the two-way street of Donleavy’s arrangements of life and art. As an autobiographical study of a theatrical work’s reception, the essay inverts the process which gave rise to the novel upon which the play was based. Its account retreads the city as a returning prodigal, echoing the earlier incarnation of Dangerfield, whose picaresque travails were in turn rooted in Donleavy’s days observing fellow Irish Americans newly enrolled at Trinity College under the G.I. Bill. The novel takes as its material both public and private transgression of Dangerfield, as he attempts to escape the restrictions of domestic family life in lust and bingeing, via Dublin’s dark recesses. In rendering the book down to two acts, the play had cut the peripatetic bouts to focus on the interior action of Dangerfield’s fractured home. *What They Did in Dublin* reminds us that the lost outward aspect returned in public performance, showing the dynamics of the novel reiterated in life, with the portrait of the city’s response duplicating, as it were, what Dangerfield did in Dublin, and what Dublin had done to him. In other words, Donleavy’s arrangement of the reception of the play acts as a call of attention to what might be considered as the metatheatrical aspects of *The Ginger Man*. Exploring these processes more fully, a less certain picture appears, less a celebration of Dangerfield’s antics than a query into the vulnerabilities that his ceaseless mock-heroism masks.

² Tellingly, the first edition of *The Ginger Man*, published in 1961, is not titled after the play, i.e. *The Ginger Man*, but rather after this framing introduction.

An episodic and sometimes poetic 31-part narrative, the original text of *The Ginger Man* was a book that boasted an aesthetics of frankness: Ireland looked at with “honest globes” (Donleavy, 2009: 48). Chafing his desperate bourgeois English wife Marion, Dangerfield alternates between sexual adventures, drunken rampage and short-lived reconciliation. Home life is broken out of into a seething Dublin. First an affair with the laundry worker; then a violent break up with his wife, before he tracks her down to a new comfortable middle-class neighbourhood; another reconciliation, concluded by a bruising binge and a sexual encounter with a lusty party-goer; a return to an empty house after the inevitable departure of Marion and in her absence, an affair with Miss Frost, the prim spinster who has taken lodging in the house to defray rental expense. Skipping debt and evading the landlord Skully, Dangerfield flees to London where he regroups, emptied out and “weary of my terrifying heart” (2009: 345).

The first irony of considering the censorship of the play of *The Ginger Man*, therefore, is that Donleavy’s decision to render the story in theatrical form necessarily required a self-censorial pen (Corrigan, 1967: 61)³. Transposing the novel, Donleavy pared his expansive screed down to two elegantly balanced acts, removing Dangerfield’s outward-bound escapades and rendering the action entirely indoors. The focus is on just four characters, arranged in a series of overlapping two-handers. Overall, this has the effect of closeting the energy of the central character, cooping the force of his ribald impulsiveness until it vents destructively. The first act alternates duets between Dangerfield and O’Keefe, and Dangerfield and Marion. O’Keefe acts, as in the novel, as the foil, comically glum in his plangent hope of sex. “The only time I forget about it is when I’m hungry”, he deadpans: “When I eat I go mad” (1961: 53). But the play’s compression soon shifts comic dialogue to darker conflict, and banter gives way to vengeful spite. The key point of change is the sudden drop from Dangerfield’s louche self-regard to puncturing humiliation as Marion appeals over her husband’s head to his father, pleading desperation. A dose of realism upsets the licenced exaggeration, shifting the language from playful rudeness to routine abuse.

Dangerfield: (*smashes off bulb of lamp on table*) Now shut up. You’re rotten. Bloody British blood. Damn stupidity. Hear me. Go ahead, cry. You’ve done the one thing for which I would kill any man. You’re a scheming slut. Did you hear what I said. I said you were a scheming slut (1961: 85).

³ The novel was published unexpurgated by Olympia press in Paris, in 1955. The author soon produced a bowdlerized version, published in London and New York, with over one hundred changes in the text, from new euphemisms to the removal of an entire chapter.

Once the second act shifts to the bourgeois home to which Marion has moved with the help of her father in law —“Eleven Golden Vale Park, the Geary”— Dangerfield’s battles with convention are repackaged in alien nicety. As opposed to the novel, in which the house is a springboard into the reaches of Dublin, the restriction of action to the interior radically repositions the recalcitrant Dangerfield. Golden Vale Park becomes an embattled location, from which debtors are fought off, and nosy moralists repelled. If the novel’s character revels in the freedom he is granted by its extensive pages, the play’s figure is cut off by a drawing-room realism that cannot show his wild exploits in public. Far from being the novel’s complicit reader, the audience is turned into a prying neighbour. However, before considering the metatheatrical implications of this change, it is worth exploring what further changes the play had to undergo, before its Dublin debut.

For the play’s prior reception in England is a crucial preparation for the Dublin rejection. A useful preface to *What they Did in Dublin* might be termed “What they did in London with *The Ginger Man*”. The play first appeared at the Fortune Theatre, London 15 September 1959, six weeks before the Dublin productions⁴. Donleavy’s play was quickly perceived to be, as one reviewer put it, “the latest addition to the bawling, lusty plays which are making such an impact on the theatre” (Anon., 1959a). Kenneth Tynan had been ensconced as the theatre critic of the *Observer* for five years already, championing trail blazers such as *Look Back in Anger*, *Waiting For Godot* and a new wave of frank American fare led by Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Harold Hobson, Tynan’s confederate at the *Sunday Times*, welcomed *The Ginger Man* in the same spirit, twinning it with Brendan Behan’s *The Hostage* as the “two modern plays in London through which blows the winds of genius” (1959), a quotation that quickly found its way onto subsequent publicity posters and programmes. However, Tynan’s allegation (made apropos the banning of André Gide’s *The Immoralist* in 1954) that “censorship has so brusquely retarded the theatrical treatment of sex that it is still, to our shame, in its infancy” still stood (Shellard & Nicholson, 2004: 149).

Although under increasing pressure from critical opinion, the Lord Chamberlain’s Office still operated as a buffer shielding British audiences from what it deemed inappropriate material. *The Ginger Man* was no exception. The reaction of the Assistant Examiner of Plays, Lt-Colonel Sir St. Vincent Troubridge, to the initial script was far from celebratory. “This horrible play resembles an Irish *Look Back in Anger*, crossed with something by James

⁴ The play had originally been intended for premiere at the New Theatre, Hull, but “owing to casting difficulties” the production was postponed until the London debut (BL LCPC 1959/1939, letter, John Wyckham to Norman Gwatkin, 2 September 1959).

Joyce, written with all his inconsequence and laziness,” began his report. “It is all belly aching (mostly about Ireland) bitching and bad language; it has no story worth mentioning and 40 lines to be considered for excision” (BL LCPC 1959/1939: anon. report, 14 April 1959). It was reluctantly recommended for licence, provided the long list of redactions could be agreed upon by the author and producer, Philip Wiseman of Spur Productions Ltd. A meeting and detailed correspondence between Wiseman and the Assistant Comptroller Brigadier Sir Norman Gwatkin ensued, in which detailed proposals for revision were batted back and forth. Of a final list of forty-one required changes (BL LCPC, 1959/1939: letter, Norman Gwatkin to Philip Wiseman, 21 May 1959), Wiseman and Donleavy made twenty-three without demur. The rest were contested. Giving his final judgement, the Lord Chamberlain Lord Scarborough, already feeling the liberal pressure of the age, agreed fifteen of the recommendations were over-zealous, but stood firm on three of the most contentious requests, resulting in a total of twenty-six alterations to the text. These included a range of euphemisms for “screwing”; and typical changes such as “your father is a sack of excrement” to “your father is an impostor” and “she’ll [the baby] piss on my shirt” to “she’ll foul my shirt” (BL LCPC, 1959/1939, letter, Philip Wiseman to Norman Gwatkin 27 May 1959). What Hobson would describe as the play’s “flow of bawdy, blasphemous richness” (1959) thus only emerged in a muted form. The Lord Chamberlain’s office had successfully dampened much of the joyful gratuitousness of Donleavy’s language, leaving the play oddly euphemistic in patches, and one stage removed from the danger Dangerfield originally expressed (BL LCP 1959/22).

A line in the sand had been drawn particularly over a phrase in which, ironically, the hero attempts to dissuade O’Keefe from his obsessions with sex and status: “Get these tweed suitings out of your mind and trousers lined with satin and put down the desires of the flesh, nipple nuttiness, nate needy, boob bothered. You don’t want an M.G. and a man servant, shallowness and deceit, or lawns to the lake” (1961: 124). Wiseman and Donleavy made a special plea for these alliterated encapsulations of lust, and one can see why. The speech contains an essential paradox at the heart of *The Ginger Man*: a salacious language of pleasure, combined with the wistful recognition of the traps of unattached desire. As Wiseman argued, “it is in the nature of a poetic expression on the part of Dangerfield and is delivered in a gentle and compassionate manner, and is so intrinsic to the mood and feeling of the play, that its excision would be most unfortunate” (BL LCPC, 1959/1939, letter, Philip Wiseman to Norman Gwatkin, 21 May 1959). As was the practice, the letter was passed up the chain of command in the Lord Chamberlain’s Office, gathering annotation as it went. By the end, three separate hands had marked in

the margin, an evidently jocular agreement “not nipple nuttiness!” (BL LCPC, 1959/1939, letter, Philip Wiseman to Norman Gwatkin, 21 May 1959) — a neat distillation of the nature of the play and its trespasses⁵. Offering by way of compromise that the rather more obscure pairing “nate needy” might be kept, but “nipple nuttiness,” never, a final script was agreed upon. “I have reread this horridness with care”, reported Troubridge, giving the green light to the revised text. “I have also compared the script with the maze of suggestions, concessions and compromises caused by the nipple nuttiness of the play” (BL LCPC 1959/1939: St Vincent Troubridge, report, 5 September 1959). The very epithet that became the in-joke encapsulation of *The Ginger Man* at the Lord Chamberlain’s Office thus remained struck out by their blue pencil. Despite such redrafting Wiseman and Donleavy accepted the process as a tough-but-necessary negotiation, a simple fact of British theatre. Interviewed at the time, J. P. Donleavy naturally talked up the power of the play to shock, while talking down the censor’s impact. “I expect a couple of rows to walk out every night, angered or shocked or offended”, he told the *News Chronicle*. Nor was he angered by the Lord Chamberlain’s cuts. “I think he has been very liberal about it” (Anon., 1959a).

Donleavy’s equanimity was naturally strategic, still attempting to claim the cachet of literary rebel. But his faith in *The Ginger Man*’s potential to test social acceptability was not altogether misplaced; and this carries significance for the Irish productions. For one thing, Wiseman had secured the up-and-coming actor Richard Harris for the role of Dangerfield, who would delight in compensating for cuts in dialogue with the dynamic physicality of performance. For another, the much-noted emphasis of the Lord Chamberlain’s Office on the censorship of language almost caused the censors to miss the most challenging scene in the play. The scene in question takes place shortly after Dangerfield’s “nate needy” exchange with O’Keefe. Alone with Miss Frost after his wife’s departure, Dangerfield pleads loneliness and the need to sleep close, for company. “Miss Frost”, he urges, “may I sleep near you tonight, for both our sakes [...] I don’t want you to misunderstand me, Miss Frost. Just bring our mattresses out here, neutral territory” (1961: 131).

On a darkened stage, the process of seduction and sexual congress are presumed in sudden ellipsis, the dialogue moving directly from the touching of hands to post-coital vulnerability. As an astonished account by a fuming observer from the Public Morality Council put it: “The beds are put side by side in the centre of the stage, Miss Frost is sitting up in bed, holding her hands

⁵ The annotations appear to be by Charles Heriot (Chief Examiner of Plays), Gwatkin, and Scarborough.

across her breasts, and giving the impression that she is naked, and crying: ‘Why did you do it?’ [in fact the line is “Why did I do it?”] This is the most objectionable play I have ever seen” (BL LCPC, 1959/1939: Public Morality Council report on performance at the Fortune Theatre, London, Tuesday 29 September 1959). As it happens, the Lord Chamberlain’s Office had noted the dubious scene, one reader worrying that belatedly “there is no mention of the action in the synopsis, but it is implicit in the text, and this is such a filthy play that I wonder what will happen” (BL LCPC 1959/1939: R. J. Hill, undated note to Gwatkin [probably 15 sept 1959]). R. J. Hill was sent as an observer, nine days into the run, to double-check, but found, contrary to the opinion of the Morality Council, that “the scene with the two mattresses was conducted with the utmost decorum” (BL LCPC 1959/1939: R. J. Hill, report, 24 September 1959). For West End theatre-goers at least, it seems, offence was taken only by those looking for it: expectations of large scale revulsion and seat-leaving were unfounded. Instead, the actors enjoyed “tornadoes of applause” (Hobson, 1959). In the turbulent context of liberal adjustment in late 1950s London, this was a rare case of the ever-cautious Lord Chamberlain’s Office neatly judging both author and audience, asserting control while alienating neither.

A month later, on Monday 26 October 1959, *The Ginger Man* opened at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, and was thrown into a quite different process of theatrical negotiation. At the root of this difference lay the fact that Ireland, unlike Britain, did not have a theatre censor —a situation that had evolved partly due to historical accident, and partly due to post-colonial processes. Productions considered obscene could only be prosecuted after the fact, not as in Britain, altered beforehand. The jurisdiction of the Lord Chamberlain (as indicated in the 1843 Theatres Act) was limited to England, Scotland, and Wales; even when Ireland had been ruled from Westminster, its theatre had been regulated through the altogether cruder means of the Lord Lieutenant’s issuing —and potentially rescinding— specific patents to individual theatres. Following Independence in 1922, Ireland preserved the conditions that had given Irish theatre exemption under British rule (both in the Free State and in the now partitioned North).

While print, film, and radio became heavily censored in Ireland, theatre escaped. Censorial processes in Ireland were never limited to the state, of course: subtler impositions of acceptability ensured theatrical conservatism was the norm (Dean, 2004). Yet the law resulted in vast disparity: while the number of books banned each year under the Censorship of Publications Act (1929) soared, rising at its peak to 1,054 in 1954 (Ó Drisceoil, 2005: 150), plays which had been banned or altered for performance in England were often aired in Ireland unexpurgated, notable examples being Wilde’s *Salomé*,

John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (Dean, 2004: 129, 179, 164). The late 1950s saw a concerted attempt by the Catholic Church to redress this anomalous position (Cooney, 1999: 328). Pressure was being brought to bear, focused by the launch of Dublin theatrical fare as a centrepiece of the *Tóstal* Festival in 1957 and 1958. Complex manoeuvring between Church and State ensued, which threw up two notable *causes célèbres*: firstly, the arrest of Alan Simpson over the Pike Theatre's production of Tennessee Williams's *The Rose Tattoo* in May 1957; secondly, Archbishop John Charles McQuaid's refusal to conduct an opening Mass for an event involving O'Casey's work *The Drums of Father Ned* and Alan McClellan's *Bloomsday*, a dramatization of Joyce's *Ulysses*. In both cases, in its effort to extend an already formidable authority over censorship regulation, the Church—and McQuaid in particular—overplayed its hand (Whelan, 2002): Simpson was exonerated, and the government alienated (Murray, 2009). O'Casey was prompted to withdraw all his works from Ireland: a gesture echoed in sympathy by Samuel Beckett. Donleavy does not acknowledge these recent precedents in *What they Did in Dublin*, but with Beckett withholding his works until May 1960 and O'Casey until late 1963, their much publicized absence from Irish theatre would put any self-respecting dramatist's honour under strain. Once Archbishop McQuaid had singled out *The Ginger Man* as his next censorial target, combative refusal, rather than compromise, was always likely to be the preferred course of action.

The initial public response by Dublin audiences, however, was not overtly hostile: this was not *The Playboy of the Western World* (which famously provoked the "riots" of 1907), and there was little by way of public protest. Donleavy presented verbatim press reports as diminishing returns, from a high point of the *Irish Times*'s "brilliant" (M. K., 1959) to the perfunctory hostility of the *Irish Independent*, which labelled the play "nauseating" and called for it to be withdrawn "with the greatest possible speed" (D. R., 1959). The *Evening Herald* and *Evening Mail* reviews, likewise, were swift denunciations possessing little critical discrimination. But reaction was not uniform: perceptive anxieties, rather than its simple rejection, are discernable. The *Irish Times* reviewer, evidently the only writer to have already read the novel, praised the adaptation for its turn to seriousness, remarking that in "this truncated version, shorn [...] of its more luridly antisocial attitudes, Mr Donleavy almost achieves his ambition of turning Dangerfield into a latterday Hamlet". Nevertheless, he confessed it "strong and often rancid meat" (M. K., 1959). The *Irish Press*, the State newspaper, took exception to one particular scene—discussed below—which came "near the end of the second act" in the play, and recorded the one example of an audience protest: a lone voice

crying out “You have gone far enough” (M. M., 1959a). Nevertheless, its critic conceded the play was, despite being distasteful, “slightly lunatic, more than slightly brilliant [...] and [Richard Harris] was magnificent at times”.

Donleavy did not read all the notices, however. Despite counting Patrick Kavanagh among his supporters, Donleavy failed to spot the poet’s journalistic intervention, perhaps because he did not think of looking at the back pages of the *Irish Farmer’s Journal*. Kavanagh defended the play as an enviably potent portrait of a bohemian Dublin he recognized well enough (and had once considered writing about himself), aired with “a healthy element of rascality” which usefully “saw the squalor as comedy” (1959). One other review Donleavy did not include in his record of events, from the *Evening Press*, is worth quoting at greater length, not least since it was critical without being dismissive. Drawn to the despair at the heart of what it describes as Dangerfield’s “drunken squalor and grotesque fantasies”, the analysis continues:

The key to the whole play is produced when he cries out “The eyes that are spying on this house will never know the despair and yelling for love that went on inside it”. [...] If the final impression is in the nature of a confused stream of consciousness, the sporadic dramatic excitements are fair compensation. They are, moreover, supported by two really funny scenes.

Fine Acting

Richard Harris (Dangerfield) prances and postures like a marionette on the verge of collapse, his lines intoned as if participating in some heathen rite. It is a performance that could irritate but for all the part’s superficial full-bloodedness, it still lacks depth and substance. Harris does succeed in investing it with some character of his own making. Rosalie Westwater (Miss Frost) is brilliantly, almost painfully real, while Genevieve Lyons (Marion) picks her way expertly through the worst dialogue in the play [...] Godfrey Quigley produces a gem of comedy as an impoverished and elemental American undergraduate. [...]

One point remains to be made quite firmly. This play is very definitely what the cinema producers like to describe as adult entertainment. The moral dish has been heavily spiced and last night it was warmly accepted as such by an adult audience (C. O’B., 1959).

This review captures more explicitly a shared perception of Dangerfield as a tragic figure rather than picaresque rogue. It was not so much the celebration of “nipple nuttiness” that Dubliners heard, but Dangerfield’s sad conclusion that “My dream was all lament” (1961: 156). While Godfrey Quigley was universally singled out as a hilarious O’Keefe, Richard Harris’s embodiment of elemental physicality is construed as tortured rather than exultant. But more than that, the interpretation given here hinged on the observation of a specific

type of torture, which this viewing public might be presumed to understand well enough—the invasive presumptions that moralistic piety imposed on those trying to struggle their way to meaningful intimacy. In doing so, the implications of a kind of location-specific metatheatricality were brought to the surface: the line “The spies that watch this house will never know the despair and yelling for love that went on inside it” (1961: 143) operates both as a reference to the Geary busybodies Dangerfield resents, and a challenge to the Dame Street audience. It poses the question: with what attitude are we brought to view these characters’ attempts at love? As self-congratulatory spies; or, as the review later suggests, as an “adult audience”?

If the reviews appear caught between pleasure at the intensity of the play and worry that it is pushing at the bounds of acceptability, it also comes with partial recognition that their consternation is itself a subject of the drama. Returning to Dublin with the play of the book, Donleavy had brought to the fore themes of acceptability, that, once repeated in its native Dublin context, become reflexively intent on their own circumstances of performance. Late in the novel, Dangerfield employs a theatrical metaphor to declare to his benighted friend O’Keefe that their time in their favoured city may be coming to a close. “They’re out there. Out there. Watching us. That is our last night audience, Kenneth. [...] After this, the curtain comes down” (2009: 241; 1961: 150). The same exchange, reiterated in the theatre, renders the meaning suddenly literal. Just as the “spying eyes” he later decries to Miss Frost, the image translates directly into an ironic reference to their performance before a paying public. It seemed particularly pertinent once the announcement was made, at the beginning of the third and final outing, that show was to be summarily withdrawn; that the spectators present would in fact be the “last night audience”. At this point too, it seems worth considering the staginess of Wiseman and Donleavy’s stand. If such reflexivity renders *The Ginger Man* in performance a metatheatrical study of the performed nature of what is acceptable, its embraced unacceptability might be also be seen as *paratheatrical* strategy, an overt intervention in a public discourse, stretching beyond the logics of the dramatized text to impose its trespasses to the point of rejection, thereby seeking to expose the same repressive forms of social convention that the play and novel first set out to satirize⁶.

⁶ Paratheatre is here used as a broad category to indicate elements of theatre praxis that operate outside or beyond the aesthetics of theatrical performance, to engage directly, and recognizably, in public discourse and/or social action. It is thus rather wider in its applications than the term as coined by Jerzy Grotowski, who deployed it to denote a move away from mimesis and actor/audience division, but more specifically toward participatory, unstructured and improvised workshops emphasizing connectedness (Wolford, 1996: 6-8).

This dynamic seems particularly intense at the moment at which, it appears, more sensitive dispositions balked. The *Irish Press* account of that point at which the cry “you have gone far enough” rang out is less than precise, but it seems likely that once again, the mattresses, brought centre stage, were the problem:

There is one scene near the end of the second act which is probably the most offensive ever performed on a Dublin stage and which I sincerely hope never again will be repeated. In a short five minutes, a travesty is made of everything that stage entertainment is supposed to mean, morals are mocked at, and indecency is flaunted. It is all very well to talk of art and freedom of expression in the theatre, but I think we have gone far enough (M. M., 1959a).

The problem for the viewer here is not simply that the stage has chosen the wrong subject, but that, as a consequence of embodiment, indecency was actually being performed, “flaunted” to be more precise. Dangerfield’s request that they sleep together in the “neutral territory” of the living room has the effect of literally dragging the taboo physicality of sex centre stage. The pretence of the fourth wall has collapsed: Miss Frost’s seduction is the seduction of the crowd itself, drawn into polite compliance. (Readers of the novel might at least have been thankful here that the play made no reference to Miss Frost’s predilection for anal sex, preferred because it is “so much less of a sin”; 2009: 256). Equally, Dangerfield’s reassurances can be construed as going out to all: “Don’t cry. God’s not going to condemn you. I’m no pagan. You’re a good person. God’s only after out and out habitual sinners. You must be sensible” (1961: 133). The case he makes to defray Miss Frost’s fear of the scandal that will follow confession carries two direct challenges to the Catholic Church’s regulation of the association of sin with guilt, one practical, one philosophical. The latter is a Rabelaisian assertion of the divine root of pleasure: “Tell me, Miss Frost, don’t you think it’s a fine instrument that God made for the poor likes of us to enjoy” (1961: 135). But it was the more concrete advice, it appears, that got the play into trouble. To avoid recrimination, Dangerfield advises: “There’s a special church on the Quays where you can confess these things” (1961: 134).

In the context of late 1950s Dublin, it is not surprising that with so many gauntlets littering the stage, one might be picked up. Archbishop McQuaid, no longer inclined to effect censorship through the action of a Church-State relationship he had recently strained, took a more direct approach. The result is well known: sending his emissary, Reverend G. Nolan, S.J. to the theatre (Dean, 2004: 167), the point was made with apparent clarity that he expected action to be taken. Louis Elliman, the manager of the Gaiety, called Donleavy and

Wiseman in for urgent meetings. And it is at this point in the proceedings that Donleavy's *What They Did in Dublin* assumes its heroic mien. In response to Elliman's request that adjustments be made to the play, Donleavy and Wiseman stuck to the letter of the contract, which gave no provision for changes in the script. The rather curious nub of the issue, according to the information relayed by Donleavy, was the reference to the church on the City Quays. It was in the diocese of the Archbishop. Might some adjustment to the script be considered? "At three minutes to eight Mr Elliman looked at his two Bronx citizens across the sofa and said for the last time 'Gentlemen, are you going to make these cuts?' And for the last time Mr Wiseman said no" (1961: 30).

The stand made at this juncture is represented as that of the defiant modernist, putting rebarbative principle before pragmatism. But there are several indeterminate questions at the heart of this controversy. Chief amongst these is the nature of the script in question. As already mentioned, Ireland had no institutional censor for stage works. It was, of course, not within the jurisdiction of the Lord Chamberlain. It is thus quite within the bounds of possibility that the text performed in Ireland was the original version, unaltered by the blue pencils of the British, or if not entirely unexpurgated, perhaps a partially adjusted text, accepting that in some cases discretion might prove the better part of valour. It is impossible to say with certainty, but given the energy Wiseman and Donleavy expended in earlier persuasions, the temptation to satisfy their love of the line "nipple nuttiness" must have been compelling. There was nothing to stop them putting it back in: least of all Richard Harris, who would surely have relished the extra mouthful.

McQuaid may be secure in his role as the devil of the piece, but some further thought should be given to the virtues of his antagonists. Little consideration is extended to the situation Louis Elliman found himself negotiating. If threats were made, we can only conjecture what they were; but it seems likely that as Elliman had only recently diversified into film production, establishing Ardmore studios with Emmet Dalton, he was newly vulnerable to Church intrusion. Ardmore was funded by an Industrial Credit Corporation government grant, and its plans to film Abbey Theatre productions would have been easily scuppered by clerical hostility (Farley, 2001: 12). Elliman was (like Wiseman) Jewish, not Catholic, and was clearly not unadventurous in his theatrical wares. He may have required only a little leeway to help mollify the men of the cloth. But no mention is made of the severity of the cuts involved. Why gratefully accede to the restrictions of the Crown censor while adamantly opposing the slightest change in Ireland? The possibility remains that just as the thematic intensity of *The Ginger Man* was so much closer to home once it literally came closer to home, the imperative of fighting the forces dealt with in the work

also became so much more intrinsic to its legacy. Nevertheless, in occluding completely the prehistory of the play's London censorships, Donleavy's subsequent account presented a mythic portrayal of artistic defiance which on reflection seems less than honest.

Reading the newspapers in that October week of *The Ginger Man's* Dublin debacle, what comes across are the intimations of social change: this was the end of the 1950s. While Wiseman and Donleavy stuck out their tongues at McQuaid, questions were being asked in the Dáil about the quarter-million pound funding granted the Abbey to rebuild. Would it be properly spent, when the Abbey Theatre was "on crutches", held back by a management's "dead hand policy [...] that had become so 'cagey'?" (Anon., 1959b). Elsewhere in the city, Billy Fury was performing at the Theatre Royal, "backed by three guitars and a drummer who doesn't spare the skins" as the *Evening Herald* put it. "Billy accompanies his songs [...] with gyrations that some find thrilling (judging by female shrieks) and more find nauseating" (M. M., 1959b). At the Docks, a strike had sprung up over which gang of stevedores was responsible for handling 1,000 tons of Babysham at the Deep Sea end of the North Wall (Anon., 1959c). And that weekend, the *Irish Press* carried the headline: "Vatican Council in 1964?", detailing that "the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Tardini, said yesterday [...] that the Council would be held in St Peter's Basilica, under the name 'The Second Vatican Council'" (Anon., 1959d). It would of course come two years sooner, in 1962, and with it a power-stripping isolation for McQuaid, who never managed to become a cardinal.

Looking beyond the end of the decade, and beyond Vatican II into the 1960s, toward the Censorship Publications Act of 1967, what most impresses is how profound and swift the change was. The Minister for Justice Brian Lenihan, regretting the humiliation of "Irish authors of world renown" in his address to the Dáil, argued that the committee of censorship of literature "has tended to make us ridiculous [...] has caused the system to look ridiculous and has brought a certain amount of odium on it" (Dáil Éireann, 1967: 709). The Irish theatre, however, required no new legislation to allow theatrical licence; and with Church power receding in the face of the liberal shift, the era of the backroom ban was effectively over. *The Ginger Man* was, in fact, the last Irish theatre censorship *cause célèbre*. In 1971, when Alan Simpson revived the play, he told the *Sunday Independent* that "I think Irish playgoers will receive it in the normal way. We have changed in our attitudes in Ireland" (Smith, 1971). He was right. Although the newspaper declared the production a "test case" it soon reported that "the revival of Donleavy's *The Ginger Man* caused no riots" (Hickey, 1971).

In the last analysis, Donleavy should not be judged severely for his rather selective account. Refusing to compromise over making cuts to the play at the bidding of Archbishop McQuaid was a significant contribution to the limitation of the churchman's power. McQuaid had been forced to exercise his will discretely because his levers in government were working less well; *The Ginger Man*, and Donleavy's account, worked to expose these apparently subtle operations of influence. It brought the issue of theatrical censorship once again into the papers. A week after the episode Gabriel Fallon, generally trusted by the Hierarchy as a sensible Catholic voice on theatrical matters (Murray, 2004: 399-401), made clear that the introduction of censorship should not be countenanced⁷. "I would oppose any move in this direction. [...] Already we have a censorship of literature and a censorship of cinema, and I am aware of a group that would dearly love to see a censor appointed to the theatre", he remarked. "There are people who are afraid of freedom [...] theatre exists or ought to exist for what the theologians call *homo quadrantus* or the well-rounded man. It is not for children or nitwits" (Fallon, 1959). If *The Ginger Man's* cancellation could win such a conclusion from Fallon, perhaps its paratheatrical intervention was more significant than its metatheatrical subtleties. Yet what a longer look at Donleavy's pragmatism reveals is that this author, for all his bold and imaginative trespass, was no Dangerfield: the resonance between the authorial voice of the novel, and the account of the play's reception—and lest we forget, that unforgettable dedication to the collected *Plays*—should be warily construed. In London, the acquiescence to censorship had been a straightforward negotiation, an argued exchange of concession for permission. In Dublin, the city in which *The Ginger Man* was set, the relationship was naturally more complex. In acknowledging the fact of both, our attention is usefully drawn away from heroic rebellion, toward the exploration of tensions between gratification of desire and social convention that operate at the heart of its Dublin productions. Rather than the simple clash of poetic licence and pietistic illiberality, the performance of the play in Dublin found a different resonance, a searching out of the metatheatrical aspects that operated between the egoism of Dangerfield's self-obsession and the stultifying climate of sexually-repressed penury which lit his fuse. Perhaps the final words of the play are also this essay's fitting conclusion:

God's mercy
On the wild
Ginger Man. (1961: 156)

⁷ Fallon may have been reflecting on his own judgements as one of the selected panel evaluating *Bloomsday* and *The Drums of Father Ned* for the Festival Committee and *Tóstal* Council in February 1958. As Murray reveals, he had voted against both plays.

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