

# Prompt Corner

**Dominic Cavendish**, Theatre Critic of *the Daily Telegraph*, discusses the Echo-Chamber of Malignity.

I'm profoundly indebted to Megan Vaughan for posting on the blog of her website ([synonymsforchurlish.com](https://synonymsforchurlish.com), 'The pandar of malignity') "an amazing quote from *The London Magazine*, 1776". It's such an amazing quote that I'm going to share an edited chunk of it, on the assumption that the original author wouldn't object and Vaughan hasn't made it up or mistyped it. [<https://synonymsforchurlish.com/the-pandar-of-malignity-17f9c078f39f>]

"The news-paper critics are another great cause of the degeneracy of the stage, for as the established morning papers are connected with the managers, this insect tribe are connected with the players, and now and then they have the honour of being noticed by the managers themselves. These hyper-critics are composed of three descriptions of men."

These "descriptions" are set down as: "[1] The managers, their flatterers, friendly acquaintance and a few independent persons. [2] Editors of papers, persons connected with the second-rate performers; and [3] scribblers looking for favours, or for a dinner, from every person concerned or connected with the theatres." [my numerics]

Vaughan gets enthused about the last category, described as "the most despicable of all" who "setting up without capital depend for all their information on the understrappers of both houses; and, of course, misrepresent, abuse, extol, and blunder without end, and without mercy: they become the very echo of the noise, nonsense, envy, rancour, and scurrility, which they nightly hear, and thus ignorance is transmuted into vice, and mere hunger is undesignedly made the pandar of malignity."

Vaughan concludes: "Love that end bit too. It's the critics 'without capital' who must scabble around for newsworthy gossip to sell; their lack of stable income is to the detriment of public discourse. In the eighteenth century they worried that sensationalist theatre coverage might encourage immorality — in the twenty-first century I worry about hits-chasing polls and casting announcements and the fact that Dominic Cavendish seems to reference *Game of Thrones* in every opening paragraph."

Perfectly true, of course. It's written into my contract with the *Daily Telegraph* that in each of the 150 + reviews I write each year, some *GoT* reference needs to be included, or site traffic will drop and I will lose my job. I'm joking, obv. I assume Vaughan is too (for one thing, I can't imagine she cares enough to wade through my hireling's piffle, cross-checking her assertions). She's operating on the basis that many a stinging true word is spoken in jest. Perhaps I'm now the official stand-out example of the way things are going, though Quentin Letts usually serves as the go-to embodiment of all that's rotten with national newspaper reviewing. The broad argument is wearily familiar: Fleet Street's dwindling band of theatre critics are so cravenly in need of their next shilling, so in hock to the theatre industry's idea of what matters, that they are, undesignedly or otherwise, acting as pimps, drumming up trade for grubby rags and scrubby theatre.

That *London Magazine* article appears a few years before Sheridan's *The Critic* — with its choice put-downs of the critical class ("Both managers and authors of the least merit laugh at your pretensions..." etc). Behold, then, I am the Dangle de nos jours.

Virtue resides outside the supposedly charmed — but implicitly cursed — circle of for-hire scribblers. But, actually, does it? It's true that I'm only ever a pay-cheque away from dire financial straits. Like many millions of others. Does that make me less suited an assessor of a play like *Beyond Caring*, about zero-hours working lives, than someone who is either so well-off or removed from the media rat-race that there is no connection between the imperative to write a review / response and the ability to put food in one's mouth? What is the economic model that would let a would-be commentator see work on a regular enough basis for their opinion to be more than an *ad hoc* intellectual pastime while letting them claim the greatest degree of impartiality and uncorruptibility? Answers on a postcard...

I don't mind personally directed barbs, however momentarily hurtful. If Natasha Tripney wants to flex her power at *The Stage* singling me out for damnation, lumping me in with a culture of adolescence and toxic masculinity, on the basis of a review of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, that's her waste of a word-count. I'm less bothered about my ability to defend a particular review than I am by the attacking tendency *per se*, the playing to the gallery of there being an "us and them", new guard / old has-beens. With the ranks of the critical "community" swelling with every passing month, does the hammering away or firing cheap shots at individual critics purge and cleanse the "culture", or does it — more likely, perhaps — stir a sense in those who go to the theatre, and aren't interested in sitting there with a note-pad on their knee, of noxious in-fighting?

It's interesting to see critics like Lyn Gardner, who have done so well out of the paid-review system, expressing approval for a transformed critical landscape ("Criticism must change...", *The Stage*, 26 October 2017, p7.) Is this the transformation she wants? Personal attacks? Twitter-spats? The accelerated dismantling of the main-stream press? "Check your privilege" is one of the buzz-phrases of the modern discourse. Going into 2018, maybe we should append "Check your prejudice" as well, for complacency about possessing moral superiority is, I'd suggest, the surest way to malignity.

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Judith Roddy as Young Woman in David Harrower's *Knives in Hens*, revived by Yaël Farber at the Donmar Warehouse  
(*Marc Brenner*).

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