In 1782, George Colman the younger, having written a long poem entitled *The Man of the People*, produced as his maiden effort for the stage a “musical farce” entitled *The Female Dramatist*. The title character, Mrs. Melpomene Metaphor, seems to enact the confusions sketched by Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s epilogue to Hannah More’s *Fatal Falsehood*:

> A Scene she now projects, and now a Dish,
> Here’s Act the First – and here – remove with Fish.
> Now while this Eye in a fine phrenzy rolls,
> That, soberly casts up a Bill for Coals;
> Black Pins and Daggers in one leaf she sticks,
> And Tears and Thread, and Bowls and Thimbles mix.1

Confusing a first course and a first act, this combination of housework and playwrighting leaves both realms in disarray. Like Sheridan’s epilogue, Colman’s play treats the figure of the female dramatist with marked condescension. A young male protagonist promises to bring Mrs. Metaphor to her senses:

> Leave the rest to me then – her Conversion is compleat, if I have any skill in Magic – You shall see me transform her into a downright housewife – and by a Single Stroke of my Art, turn her Pen into a Needle, and her Tragedies into Thread papers.2

It is tempting to read *The Female Dramatist* as poorly disguised wish fulfilment: Colman, just beginning to write for the stage, may well have been daunted by reigning female dramatists such as Hannah More and Hannah Cowley. London audiences, however, did not share the wish that female dramatists return to their housekeeping: the play was acted only once, on a benefit night. Colman himself remarked that “this Farce was noticed in a very conspicuous manner, – for it was uncommonly hiss’d, in the course of its performance.”3 Arrived at an age of greater
maturity, Colman transferred his hostility from the figure of the female dramatist to the farce itself:

On perusing the manuscript after a long lapse of time, I threw the “Female Dramatist” into the flames, as a fit companion for the “Man of the People”; – and, if this Consumed Couple had belong’d to any Author but myself, he would not, perhaps, have had the folly, or candour, (or whatever else it may [be] call’d), to rake up their ashes. *(Random Records, i.112–13)*

Perusing Colman’s memoirs after a still longer lapse of time, we might pause to ask, what made the Female Dramatist a fit companion for the Man of the People – and what justified burning them both in effigy?

The “Man of the People” immortalized in Colman’s youthful verse was the flamboyant politician Charles Fox, famous for his appeal to popular sentiment and his shifting political alliances. Coincidentally, perhaps, in 1782 Fox’s name had been publicly linked with that of the former actress and future female dramatist Mary Robinson – though her farce, *Nobody*, produced in 1794, fared little better than Colman’s first effort. In 1782, however, Robinson was best known as “Perdita,” the abandoned mistress of the Prince of Wales. Her brief affair with Fox seems to have caught the public imagination: contemporary caricatures continued to link this woman of the theatre with the “Man of the People” long after their actual liaison was over. In some prints, Robinson appears as a woman of the people, making possible an unsavory connection between demagoguery and prostitution (the figure of the public woman). In other prints, Robinson is linked both with the prince and with Fox, visually and sexually recording the political alliance between the two men. More generally, however, I think the coupling of Fox and Robinson can be seen as acknowledging the common importance of theatricality – performance, costume, staging – in the apparently disparate practices of politics, theatre, and femininity. Part of what made the “Female Dramatist” of the late eighteenth century a fit companion for the “Man of the People” is the fact that both were politicians: more specifically, both sought to influence public opinion while remaining professionally dependent on public favor. Indeed, as I shall argue in this book, connections between the female dramatist and the demagogue politician were encouraged by the ubiquitous late eighteenth-century analogy between theatre and politics, and by a changing understanding of the “public” addressed by national theatre and national politics alike.

Colman destroyed his own youthful efforts in verse and drama; over the past two centuries, the cultural associations linking his “Consumed
Couple” have also been destroyed, or at least lost to memory and historical record. Thus in sifting through the ashes of Colman’s youthful literary pyre, this book also participates in a larger process of historical recovery, the first step of which has been to reconstruct women’s participation in late eighteenth-century theatre. Jacqueline Pearson’s *The Prostituted Muse* (1988) surveys the literary production and reception of women dramatists over the course of the long eighteenth century. Sandra Richards’s *The Rise of the English Actress* (1993) traces the increasing influence and respectability of actresses within English society. Julie Carlson’s *In the Theatre of Romanticism* (1994) notes some of the critical connections linking Romantic theatre and politics; in the process, she emphasizes both the influence of Sarah Siddons and the general “surveillance of public women” in the writings of Romantic poets and critics. Ellen Donkin’s *Getting into the Act* (1995) underscores the obstacles facing women playwrights within a male-dominated, tightly structured theatre system. Catherine Burroughs’s *Closet Stages* (1997) helps expand the boundaries of what we understand as theatre to include closet drama and private theatricals: two arenas in which women had greater influence and control. Judith Pascoe’s *Romantic Theatricality* (1997) examines the broader theatricality of romantic culture, exploring the element of staging involved in such disparate events and practices as the 1794 treason trials, the reception of Siddons’s star persona, the production of poetry columns in newspapers, and the development of Wordsworth’s later public persona.

Much of this recovery work has quite rightly emphasized the constraints under which women struggled to act in the world of late eighteenth-century theatre. Yet one of the most striking features of the London stage in the 1780s and 1790s remains the increased prominence of women playwrights and the continued influence of actresses. Against Donkin’s carefully detailed and highly persuasive account of the gender bias against which women dramatists struggled in the latter half of the eighteenth century, we might set the increase in women dramatists over those years. Against Carlson’s account of the surveillance of public beauties, we might set Richards’s description of actresses’ social influence. Striving for the kind of balance available only after extensive historical recovery has already taken place, this book focuses both on the fact of women’s theatrical prominence and the possible sources of their unlikely influence. It thus differs from the works mentioned above, first in exploring the opportunities available to women through theatre, and second, in viewing women’s theatrical engagement as an explicitly political act.
Discussions of the “bourgeois public sphere” first described by Jürgen Habermas seemed to divide that realm of “rational-critical debate” into the male public domain of coffeehouses, newspapers, and parliamentary debate, and the feminized, private, mixed-class world of the bourgeois novel. Yet theatre, ignored by historians and critics alike as a degraded form, offered an intermediate public sphere, producing political fictions and commentary in a mixed-gender, mixed-class setting. And in this theatrical public sphere women were far more active participants than critics or historians have yet acknowledged. The conservative poet and pamphleteer Hannah More first broke into literary circles with her outrageously popular tragedy *Percy* (1777). Hannah Cowley was first and foremost a dramatist, and only secondarily a Della Cruscan poet. Mary Robinson’s literary career as poet, novelist, and dramatist relied heavily on her notoriety as the celebrity actress and public woman “Perdita.” The less scandalous Elizabeth Inchbald was also an actress before she turned her hand to drama and fiction. Joanna Baillie was heralded as the “Shakespeare” of the age. Even women less emphatically connected with the stage had ties to it: as Margaret Doody has shown, Frances Burney repeatedly wrote for the stage as well as for a reading public; poet and novelist Charlotte Smith authored one mixed comedy, *What Is She?* (1799), which enjoyed moderate success; Anna Seward carefully divided her verse novel, *Louisa* (1784), into descriptive and dramatic epistles. Even Mary Wollstonecraft wrote a comedy, which William Godwin burned at her death.

Participating in the world of the London stages, these women also engaged the political issues of their times, discussing English imperialism, women’s rights, the French revolution, and so forth. Yet such political engagement challenges the accepted wisdom of “separate spheres.” If domestic interiors constituted women’s proper sphere of influence, why were so many women connected with the very public – and inherently political – world of the London stage? Newspaper critics and politicians commented explicitly on the theatricality of politics during the 1780s and 1790s, and when women writers wanted to mount a political critique, theatricality was a tool which came readily to hand – as Mary Wollstonecraft’s famous attack on Edmund Burke demonstrates. But other women writers used theatre and politics more subtly. Parliamentary debates and political show trials invoked conventions of (and direct comparisons with) theatrical performances, while claiming more serious effects; conversely, Hannah Cowley’s *A Day in Turkey; or the Russian Slaves* (1791) disclaimed political relevance, while mimicking political positions elaborated within those contemporary parliamentary debates.
Women on the Romantic stage also chose to step on to the stage of the nation; this book charts some of their performances and the effects they created. “Staging the Nation,” the first part of the book, works to explore the interrelations among genre, gender and nation in the Romantic period. Firstly it traces the ubiquitous Romantic analogy between theatre and nation; secondly it suggests that the ambivalence of this analogy was controlled partly by polarizing spectacle and sentiment; thirdly it examines the ways public women marked the contested border between theatre and politics; and fourthly it considers the forms of farce and romance as cultural containers for larger anxieties about the role of women within the nation.

The second part of the book, “Romancing the State,” examines the life performances of public women like Emma Hamilton and Mary (Perdita) Robinson along with the political effects of those performances; it traces the extent to which these celebrity performances were structured according to the conflicting scripts of late eighteenth-century romance. Late eighteenth-century theatrical reception increased the emotional, sexual, and political frisson associated with public performers by blurring the boundaries between stage and life. Thus in reconstructing the performances of public men and public women, I consider how those performances appear, refracted, in letters and memoirs as well as in contemporary caricatures and reviews.

The third part of the book, “Mixed Drama, Imperial Farce,” attends to the topical political issues addressed by women’s mixed dramas. While romance mingled myth and history, the fabulous and the real, the world of theatre and that of real life, mixed drama disrupted the boundaries between sentiment and farce, tears and laughter, moral earnestness and amoral cynicism. And while romance seemed to focus on the composition of the heroic nation, mixed drama explored the comedy of international relations. Working to recenter the period in its imperial and colonial contexts, the chapters in this part of the book expand our current understanding of Romantic orientalism by exploring the most relevant drama of Hannah Cowley and Elizabeth Inchbald. Arguing that mixed drama allowed women a voice in contemporary political debates as long as they disavowed political intentions, I read Cowley’s *A Day in Turkey* (1791) against contemporary parliamentary debates about Britain’s role in the conflict between Turkey and Russia. In three of Elizabeth Inchbald’s most popular plays, I examine the way a simple inversion of political expectations develops into a more complicated...
internalization of duplicity as a basis for domestic relations and international affairs alike.

Throughout the book’s more general exploration of genre and national agency, I try to stay focused on the materiality and specificity of each woman’s theatrical career. The end result, linking cultural studies with detailed readings of texts, suggests new ways of thinking about politics and agency as it revises critical perspectives on literary and dramatic form.
PART I

Staging the nation
CHAPTER ONE

The politics of Romantic theatre

Nation is to modern society as genre is to literature: a messy yet indispensable category of analysis, a gesture toward relationships only loosely defined or definable. If genre can be defined as a set of conventions which allow individual texts to “signal their membership in a class,” nation might likewise be described as a set of conventions which allow individual people to signal their membership within a particular political, social category.1 Ernest Gellner’s working definition of nation, for instance, highlights both the conventionality of a “shared culture” and the importance of signaling and recognizing membership in a given category:

1. Two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating.
2. . . . A mere category of persons . . . becomes a nation if and when the members of the category firmly recognize certain mutual rights and duties to each other in virtue of their shared membership of it. It is their recognition of each other as fellows of this kind which turns them into a nation.2

The political power of such recognition is exceeded only by its formalism, and thus its apparent superficiality.

Indeed, analysts of nations and of genres seem similarly bemused by the arbitrariness, the emptiness of the conventions with which they have to work.3 Critics like Eve Sedgwick have puzzled over the fact “that a form with the historical stature of the Gothic novel should be so adequately reducible to a formula.”4 Benedict Anderson, for his part, drew attention to the “political” power of nationalisms vs. their philosophical poverty and even incoherence,” noting that “[t]his ‘emptiness’ easily gives rise . . . to a certain condescension” (Imagined Communities, 5). Anderson himself makes the emptiness of nationalism a central part of his argument, pointing to the empty Tomb of the Unknown Soldier as an apt monument to modern national identity, and emphasizing “empty,
homogeneous time” as the temporality of modern nationhood. And if bare conventionality is often used to explain the historical adaptability of a genre such as gothic or romance, such an explanation might also apply to nationalism’s social and political adaptability. While noting nationalism’s unwavering advocacy of respectability, for instance, George Mosse also suggests that “[i]n its long career, [nationalism] attempted to co-opt most of the important movements of the age, to absorb all that men thought meaningful and dear even while holding fast to certain unchanging myths and symbols” (Nationalism and Sexuality, 9). Nationalism’s capacity for absorption here registers a certain lack of “independent” meaning. At the same time, Mosse’s account of nationalism’s development emphasizes the somewhat uncanny agency of this imagined entity – its attempt to coopt other movements – a feature of nationalism to which we shall return.

The analogy between nation and genre highlights the puzzling appeal of their conventions. What makes the formula of romance repeatedly attractive to its readers? What makes the political formula of fascism persuasive instead of boringly predictable? Differing in content and consequence, these two questions are nonetheless oddly similar in kind. Playing one against the other may teach us something new about each – or remind us of similarities we have forgotten.

This book explores the late eighteenth-century tendency to view the English state as a stage: a place of genre-governed performance both enclosing and addressing a vast, somewhat stylized national audience. Within this spectacular nationalism, I argue, gender functioned as a diacritical mark distinguishing, from the perspective of different writers, good theatre and good models of national politics from bad. The first part of this general introduction examines late eighteenth-century analogies between nation and stage, emphasizing the multifaceted struggle for relative power among audience members, actors, dramatists, and managers of the London theatres. The second section suggests that the ambivalence of the theatrical analogy worked itself out, in critical and political terms, by polarizing sentiment and spectacle. The third section sketches some of the ways public women served to articulate the border between theatre and national politics and thus came to intensify the ambivalence of the theatrical analogy. The final part of the chapter argues that while the theatrical modes of romance and farce were invoked to encapsulate political fears of female power, both forms provided women with new access to political influence and dispute. This introduction ends with a preview of the romance and farce sections.
which follow, linking (1) the limited agency of actresses with the form of stage romance, and (2) the woman dramatist’s critical mimicry of social structures with the form of the mixed drama, or what we might call the sentimental farce.

THE THEATRICAL ANALOGY

Late eighteenth-century discussions of theatre and politics tend to dwell on the theatre’s ability to shape a mass of spectators into an audience and, by extension, its power to shape that audience into a nation. In emphasizing the links between politics and the stage, social critics in the 1780s and 1790s drew on a long-established association between theatre audiences and the body politic – an association dating back at least to the “Glorious Revolution.” The restoration of the monarchy had, after all, brought with it the restoration of the English stage; the Glorious Revolution, with its newly minted Bill of Rights, gave focus to the analogy between spectator and citizen.6 One theatrical commentator, writing in 1770, made the analogy between theatrical spectator and the subject of a limited monarchy explicit: “As I address this letter to you in the spirit of the public, I expect to be attended to; for though an his-trionic monarchy, you hold your empire on their opinion.”7 Theatre offered a model for a political state in which a socially mixed public held power – if only through the force of its opinions.

By the latter part of the century, however, the great compromise represented by the Glorious Revolution was coming under increased pressure and scrutiny. The Wilkite agitation of the 1760s, an increasing insistence on universal male suffrage, the upheavals associated with the French revolution – all of these threatened to disrupt the treasured stability of the British state. Yet in the turbulent close of the century, theatre critics, politicians, and social commentators continued to refer to the London theatres as a model for national unity. In the revolutionary year of 1789, for instance, the essayist of The Bystander claimed that “being the fountain of public taste, it is of national importance that it [the drama] should be kept pure and uncorrupted.”8 In 1793, theatre critic William Woodfall likewise asserted his “thorough conviction that a well-regulated stage was the best possible succedaneum to the laws of a free country.”9 Regulating theatre and preventing its corruption appeared an important part of efforts to stave off or counteract the tyranny of France’s revolutionary terror.

Why did theatre – or at least the theatrical analogy – seem so politically charged in this time of perceived crisis? The answer may lie in the...