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Writing to his friend and mentor Charles Cowden Clarke in March 1817, John Keats asked, “When shall we see each other again? In Heaven or in Hell, or in deep Places? In crooked Lane are we to meet or on Salisbury Plain? Or jumbled together at Drury Lane door?” (*Letters* 1.126). By way of *Macbeth*, Keats’s joke encompasses a universe of experience – heaven, hell, London’s crooked streets, the mythical English countryside, the textual Shakespeare, the performed Shakespeare – all held together conceptually by the notion of the theater. An intrepid playgoer, Keats knew what it was to visit the street carnival of the theater district, to be “jumbled up” with the crowds making their way down clogged byways to see Edmund Kean’s latest impersonation of Shylock or Richard III. There, Keats implies, the metaphysical and the apocalyptic meet the bodily and the everyday on the threshold of the playhouse where his favorite actor reigns. Yet in a sense the letter imagines two Keatses at once: he is an actor parodying Shakespeare’s lines even as he is a would-be audience member off to meet a friend. Both aspects give us a glimpse of how vital theatrical experience was to Keats’s sense of himself as a social being. For him, theater was both an event to be attended and a naturalized sign of England’s literary-cultural inheritance. Against the “binary assumptions” separating theater as literature from theater as performance – assumptions that have long governed our scholarly thinking – we see here a young man ensconced in the vivid and transgressive world of performance that Kean’s Drury Lane embodied, and a poet for whom the act of writing and the act of theater-going were intimately connected.¹

Keats’s happy association of the theater with a distinctly English brand of sociable behavior is no rarity. As a wealth of recent scholarship has affirmed, theater was a central public experience in London and throughout Britain during the Romantic period. Some of that importance can be attributed to heightened public sensitivity, especially in the metropole, to the political theatricality the French Revolution had set in motion. In his

Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790), Edmund Burke had described events across the Channel as a theatrical spectacle run amok. Worse, the Revolution had aroused the degraded theatrical tastes of an English public: “Plots, massacres, assassinations, seem to some people a trivial price for obtaining a revolution. A cheap, bloodless reformation, a guiltless liberty, appear flat and vapid to their taste. There must be a great change of scene; there must be a magnificent stage effect; there must be a grand spectacle to rouse the imagination” (156). The implication of Burke’s recourse to theatricality is, of course, that once theater is used to describe social revolution it threatens to occasion revolution. A public whose tastes for spectacle were indulged in the theater might seek similar satisfaction in the larger political and social spheres in which they lived and moved. For Burke, as for Wordsworth writing a decade later in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, the line between news of the “great national events which are daily taking place” and the country’s “theatrical exhibitions” had blurred dangerously, fomenting a “craving for extraordinary incident” among an increasingly urban populace (177). In the wake of the Revolution and the English reaction to its excesses, the city’s playhouses rehearsed nightly the unsettled relations between lower and upper classes that would haunt the British polity throughout the next century. As theater grew more popular and theaters grew larger between 1789 and the first English Reform Bill in 1832, there was fear among some Britons that, in Jerome Christensen’s words, “the proscenium would not hold” (*Romanticism at the End of History* 4).

Scholarship focused on the political and material aspects of the Romantic-period “theatrical revolution” continues to have great value (Moody, “Theatrical Revolution” 199). Daniel O’Quinn, Jane Moody, and Gillian Russell, among others, have explored the social effects of performance within Britain’s national theaters, in a host of illegitimate venues that sprung up in the period, and throughout the wider culture of military and political spectacle that marshaled national sentiment on behalf of a nation at war.² In the 2000s, scholars expanded the historical and geographical range of inquiry to include the entirety of the British Empire and beyond, and they developed notions of “Romantic sociability” that transcended and complicated the (at times) monolithic notions of theatrical reception that had informed the work of earlier historians.³ Where Burke and Wordsworth once perceived reasons for fear, current scholars have uncovered a complex set of cultural practices, the ideological dimensions of which vary markedly depending on the theater, national context, roster of actors, plays being performed, and other factors.

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Certainly theater's increased significance in Romantic-period Britain – as a site of symbolic contest no less than as a center of friendly sociability – occurred in part because of changes theater historians have already delineated well: the French Revolution, the expansion of London's Covent Garden and Drury Lane theaters in 1809 and 1811, developments in production technologies, the emergence of unlicensed playhouses and performances around the turn of the century, and the theatrical trajectories of Britain's public life.⁴ *Romanticism and Theatrical Experience* aims to extend this work by arguing that a rapid expansion of Britain's periodical culture brought theater for the first time within the experiential compass of many who never even set foot inside a playhouse. Theater's continual presence both as advertisement and as reported event in commercial newspapers, and as the focus of a growing number of periodicals devoted principally and even solely to theatrical topics, rendered it part of the daily experience of a growing body of readers. Particularly after 1800, theater's impact began in new ways to reach beyond the restricted time and place of its performances because, quite simply, more and more people were writing and reading about theater on a regular basis. This expansion of periodical culture enabled theater to generate – and in turn be influenced by – written discussions about all manner of theatrical experiences: performances surely, but also the lives of actors on and off stage, the political and aesthetic significance of the plays performed, and accounts of audience members' attendance in the playhouses. What happened on stage and in the aisles of the city's playhouses came to symbolize, through a repeatable and reportable collective ritual, the happenings of the local and national communities with which readers' lives were bound up. No surprise, then, that Romantic-period theater became “the pre-eminent mode of public entertainment throughout Britain and the empire” (Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre* 12), and that people began, like Keats, to think of themselves and their communities in theatrical terms.⁵

John Orlando Parry's *The Posterman* conveys a sense of how theater's presence in Britain had by 1835 produced a new and unavoidable regime of signs that took on a life of its own, beyond their explicit connection to the particular events taking place in the playhouses (Figure 1). With its visual insistence on the accrual of theater's textual ephemera into a monolithic wall of signification, the painting emblemizes the subject of Part I of this book: the tension between theater's eventful impermanence and its lasting textual remainders. Presided over by a massive facade covered with the day's posted advertisements, more than half promote some form of theatrical



Figure 1: John Orlando Parry, *The Posterman* (1835)

entertainment, alongside travel postings, political ads, ads for consumer goods, and even a call to see a circus of “industrious fleas.”⁶ Theater is imbricated here with, and propels, the larger commercial and social movements of the city. Parry’s street is not only a physical thoroughfare but also a venue for theatrical publicity that opens up myriad cultural experiences to passers-by, offering them imaginative transport beyond the everyday. Ads for the “ADELPHI/Robert Macaire/Tom and Jerry/The Christening!!!!/Every Evening,” and for “The Destruction of Pompeii Every Evening” partially obscure others for “The Spectacular King Arthur” and for the “Native Tales” of “NOURJAHAD!” and “HERMANN!” The scene, in fact, lacks almost all sense of visual depth except that provided by the wall’s commercial palimpsest, as the flatness of St. Paul’s dome in the background confirms. Poster fragments can be seen four and five deep, and the building’s support beams and fence are similarly covered. Torn bits of outdated ads lie scattered on the ground or hang loosely in the wind. Indeed, the human figures in the foreground are secondary in the picture to the advertisements presiding over them. Collected into two discrete groups – a soldier, two gentlemen, and a pickpocket on the left, and a series of street vendors on the right – the

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figures frame a central space where the posterman stands as he adds yet another poster to the wall's mighty collection.

Parry's scene conveys a public life outside the bounds of any kind of bourgeois public sphere, leaving little room for its viewer to imagine a culture defined by individuals coming together to engage in the "public use of their reason" (Habermas 27).⁷ And yet the theater – its publicity, its performances, and most especially the textual afterlife it occasioned in newsprint and periodicals – played a crucial role in the continual reimagining of individual and collective experiences in Romantic-period England. My interest in how the theatrical press transformed daily events into readable texts extends the work of recent cultural historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who, in the words of Ann Bermingham, have begun "to explore the way in which the activity of consuming culture enables individuals to construct social identities" ("The Consumption of Culture" 9).⁸ Such studies have deepened our understanding of the cultural choices available to consumers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as of the ways in which those choices came to be made by individual and collective agents. John Brewer's account is exemplary in its description of efforts "to create a culture that was polite, moderate, reasonable, morally instructive, decorous, and restrained" (341) in response to a perceived Rabelasian consumerist carnival "which undercut the claim that culture could and should be impartial, disinterested, dispassionate, and virtuous" (341). Against this attempted division of high from low or public from private, new historiographies have favored the particular experiences of individuals – men and women, rich, poor, and from the middle orders – in matters of writing, style, drawing, and other kinds of pastimes. Attention to such activities in their historical particularity – without recourse to the grand narrative of a "consumer revolution" offered by earlier scholars such as Neil McKendrick – has begun to yield insights into how our own enduring assumptions about culture and public life were profoundly shaped by the Romantic period. What Kathleen Wilson has called "localized contests for power" have now become a central concern of both historians and literary scholars as they attempt to understand more fully the roles that different kinds of people took in reframing notions of public and private experience (15).⁹ Recovery of material contexts is of course central to this effort, but so too – especially among literary scholars – must be close attention to the textual forms through which people working and writing during that time expressed their experiences.

In dialogue with this scholarly conversation, *Romanticism and Theatrical Experience* seeks to elucidate how theatrical institutions – principally those

in London – provided a prominent imaginative locus around which concerns about personal and collective cultural experience could coalesce. Rather than a historical account of early-nineteenth-century British theater that attends to the material conditions of theatrical production or to the economic factors surrounding periodical publication, I am interested in how those performances and institutions were mediated through the textual prisms of Britain's, and more specifically London's, newspapers and theatrical periodicals. Harriet Guest has argued that from the mid-eighteenth century on, British periodicals “can be understood to articulate and address the cultural nexus of instability formed by the complex of relations between the distinctions of public and private and of gender” (40). Nowhere is this articulation more evident than in London's theatrical press around the turn of the century. After the Old Price riots of 1809, in which audiences protested changes in pricing and seating at London's newly opened Covent Garden Theatre, Britain's theatrical press presented an ongoing conversation among varieties of people attempting to make sense of their engagements with performances in all manner of theatrical venues. On an almost daily basis, the writing I will consider in Chapters 1 and 2 manifested just the tension that Brewer describes, as theatrical critics and reviewers attempted to translate the unruly experiences theater provided into readable, consumable text. Accordingly, I will employ the term “theatrical experience” throughout the book to describe not primarily the encounters people had inside playhouse walls, but the ways in which reading, writing, and talking about theater facilitated reconsiderations of what it meant to be a person living in London in the first three decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ Beyond enabling the evaluation of individual cases of theatrical experience, the totality of theater's print artifacts provides an important conceptual framework for understanding the emergence of aesthetic categories rooted in new modes of feeling, which have traditionally been marginalized and which Mary Jacobus argues “ought . . . to complicate any simple view between Enlightenment subjectivity and what comes to be called ‘literature’ during the period” (276).

My archival attention focuses on the early-nineteenth-century theatrical press because newspapers and theatrical periodicals constituted at that time a collective and repeated, even ritualized, effort to translate events into objects of readerly attention. The material text of the theatrical periodical offered a tangible (if usually) ephemeral artifact of a now-concluded performance, even as it provided for the reader a way of orienting the self toward the public world within which that event had taken place. The first two chapters of the book attempt to bring what Sean Latham and Robert

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Scholes have called the approach of “periodical studies” together with accounts of cultural consumerism that, once attuned more to the consumption of objects rather than events, have begun to consider the social effects of various cultural practices on the formation of individual and collective subjectivities.¹¹ We can learn something, in other words, by considering how texts representing and occasioning theatrical experience set in motion new ways of thinking and writing beyond what might be strictly considered theatrical criticism. If, as Paige Reynolds has argued in a modernist context, “periodicals expose the productive tension between the emergence of mass print culture and the long-standing practices of poetic recitation and performance,” the early-nineteenth-century theatrical press shaped the development of Romantic poetics no less dramatically, inaugurating, in fact, an ongoing textual negotiation between performance and poetry that Reynolds finds fully on display some nine decades later (120). Here, then, is a wide resource for imagining not only how people lived in and moved through what James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin have called the “Romantic metropolis,” – but more intimately how the effects of that living and moving shaped their literary writing. More than showing how preexisting subjects participated in the discursive activities of a stable public exchange, the archive of Romantic-period theatrical criticism exemplifies nothing less than a collaborative reimagining of cultural experience in Regency England.

Despite its significance, Romantic-period theater and its attendant print culture were largely forgotten for much of the twentieth century, as literary scholars fashioned a Romanticism presided over by poets who resisted contemporary political and social pressures by emphasizing personal interiority.¹² “Romantic drama,” if considered at all, was explained as the curious by-product of an intensely lyrical age. As the new historicism began in the 1980s and 1990s to expand the canon of texts considered worthy of attention, renewed interest in Romantic-period drama manifested itself initially in two ways: first, in a commitment to challenge lyric poetry as the paradigmatic Romantic genre,¹³ and second and more importantly, in a heightened awareness of theatricality in Romantic-period Britain’s larger social world.¹⁴ What is striking about the way these conversations developed is that even as scholars recovered forgotten texts, interrogated notions of Romantic canonicity, and rediscovered the material and political contexts of Romantic-period theatrical production, divisions between literary-minded and performance-minded scholars stubbornly endured.¹⁵ To illustrate this point, I will turn briefly here to what is arguably the most significant work of 1990s theatrical historicism, Julie Carlson’s *In the*

Theatre of Romanticism: Coleridge, Nationalism, Women, which was published in 1994. Among many important studies, Carlson's stands out for two reasons: first, because it considered Romantic drama as a textual genre in the context of counterrevolutionary England's performed theater, and second, because it exemplified how theatrical scholarship could begin to explore the social nature of "Romantic" literary writing. For Carlson, Romantic "antitheatricalism" is driven by a misogynist impulse to contain the threat of bodies, and particularly women's bodies, to a strictly defined performance space (2).¹⁶ Arguing that Coleridge's playwriting in his "middle stage," between 1807 and 1816, is a systematic attempt to communicate anti-Jacobin political philosophy to popular audiences, Carlson posits a Romanticism in which theater must eventually give way to a highly textual literary culture.¹⁷ Yet if Carlson's focus on Coleridge's sublimation of social tension into a paradigmatic antitheatricalism made a vivid case for how theatrical culture could help us rethink Romantic authorship, the full implications of that case remain even now, more than two decades later, relatively undeveloped when compared with the explosion of historicist studies focused on theater's wider political significances.¹⁸ That is, despite the fact that some of our fundamental assumptions about Romantic-period theater and Romantic-period literary production have been overturned, we still need to understand more fully how Britain's late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century theatrical world relates to the literature that came to constitute Romanticism generally, and Romantic poetry more specifically.

One salutary counter to this scholarly lacuna is the work of Michael Gamer, which explores how popular Gothic drama shaped writers' notions of cultural authority, genre, and literary history. As Gamer contends, "[T]he explosion of Gothic fiction and stage drama – especially a drama that depends on upon spectacle, and therefore upon the work of many hands, destabilizes notions of authorship and originality in the Romantic period" ("Authors in Effect" 833).¹⁹ In this vein, Gamer's discussion of *Lyrical Ballads* in his book *Romanticism and the Gothic* (2000) remains the most significant attempt to date to describe theater's influence on Romantic lyric. Through an analysis of the textual venues and institutional contexts in which the Gothic genre was contested, Gamer situates *Lyrical Ballads* as an attempt to engage poetry readers' interest in Gothic while avoiding the taint of Gothic's "low" associations.²⁰ Still, given Gamer's focused attention to the Gothic and his formulation of a largely negative relation between Gothic and lyric, there remains a significant gap in current discourse about theater's relation to Romantic writing, a gap that our

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brief return to Carlson's study might begin to help bridge. Seizing on Carlson's concern not only with literary genre but also with the forms and rhetorical practices at work in Coleridge's dramas, *Romanticism and Theatrical Experience* asks some related but still unanswered questions: in contrast to the "antitheatrical" writers who came of age under the shadow of the guillotine, how might we account for a later generation's fascination with the centrality of theater to its own experience? And how might we come to understand that centrality to have influenced not simply that generation's efforts at dramatic authorship but also its more canonical poetic writings? How, in short, does literary and specifically poetic form represent and respond to Romantic writers' theatrical experience?

My interest in the so-called second generation of Romantic writers, principally Hazlitt and Keats, is prompted by a desire to move away from the well-explored theatrical aftermath of the French Revolution as well as by a recognition that the sustained production of theatrical periodicals between 1809 and 1830, an output that was unmatched in the century before or after, transformed how theater was written and read about. London is at the center of all of this, both because it was the theatrical capital of the nation and because the effects of the periodical culture I describe were felt there most fully. In this way, the figures I will consider in the book – Kean, Hazlitt, and Keats – can be taken as exemplars of a particular strain of second-generation, urban, Cockney Romanticism whose influence nonetheless reaches outward into the larger city and nation. Closely examined, the wide-ranging field of early nineteenth-century theatrical periodicals reveals a network of authors and readers continually remaking the relations between individual and community, private and public, cultural producer and cultural consumer. Reviews and advertisements in morning papers, daily theatrical gazettes reporting events of the stage, and moralistic weeklies railing against the commercialism of their competitors offered a growing range of choices for early nineteenth-century readers. Theatrical periodicals, that is, collectively constituted a social institution that not only, in Pierre Bourdieu's words, proved "indispensable to [the] consumption" of early nineteenth-century theater (*Rules of Art* 293), but also enabled writers and critics working in the field to respond to what they perceived as overly commercialized practices of cultural reception.²¹ Examining a wide variety of these publications, many of them unread for the past two hundred years, I describe how reading audiences found in theatrical periodicals not simply new ways to encounter a rapidly expanding public world but also new ways to imagine what it meant to be an actor, a critic, and even a poet in that time and place. If many periodical reviewers displayed anxieties about the politically and aesthetically

unsettling dimensions of theatrical performance, the figures who would preside over what came to be called late Romanticism took performance as an informing principle for their writing. Charting with increasing intimacy the ways in which witnessing a public performance could transform their sense of themselves as private individuals, theatrical critics like Leigh Hunt and William Hazlitt invited periodical readers – among them poets like Keats – to rethink their own positions between commercial and “high” culture, between their private lives and the public life represented and enacted by the theater.²² My exploration of this phenomenon will also enable me to investigate why theatrical and lyric Romanticisms continue to be estranged, despite the nearly three decades of significant scholarly attention Romantic drama and theater have received. For even as rigorous historical work has provided us with new insights into late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century theatrical production and its social effects, that work has often, if only by omission, reinforced the same generic divisions that first privileged Romantic-period poetry and later marked it as ideologically overburdened. *Romanticism and Theatrical Experience* will address this problem by drawing specific connections between the rise of theatrical experience and Keats’s development of a new kind of Romantic prosody.

As Jon Klancher noted in 1987, gaining access to the forgotten archive of early nineteenth-century “text-making . . . means refusing any premature judgments of taste, since what is at issue is precisely the historical forming of taste as well as readers’ interpretive modes” (*Making of English Reading Audiences* ix). This project is an attempt to chart a moment in Britain’s cultural history when practices, and practitioners, of theatrical reception were beginning to display that formation in self-conscious ways, both physically in theaters and culturally in print, as journals and newspapers employed different formal strategies to cultivate distinct reading audiences. To that end, Part I, “The Making of British Theater Audiences,” provides a field study of the period’s theatrical writing, from reviews and advertisements in morning papers to daily theatrical gazettes to weekly and monthly journals. Chapter 1, “Theater and the Daily News,” analyzes how theater’s appearance in daily newspapers’ advertising and reporting discourses – as both play notices and as reviews – affected readers’ perceptions of theater as a public experience. Chapter 2, “Britain’s Theatrical Press, 1800–1830,” charts the emergence of a range of new periodicals, in London principally but not exclusively, during the three decades after 1800. These publications differed widely in material quality, price, and look, and they employed diverse strategies to attract