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Edited by Donald Roy

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Part One: Britain

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Introduction

The terms 'Romantic' and 'Revolutionary' suggest a clear-cut stylistic evolution informing British acting techniques, stage presentation and audience tastes in the period 1790 to 1850. In fact such a perspective is difficult to sustain in a period of social and aesthetic turbulence characterized by the clash between the old and the new and by determined efforts to retain the verities of the past on the part of performers and those managers who believed that the award of letters patent entitled them to a perpetual theatrical monopoly. On the other hand, there were equally determined attempts on the part of new audiences and new theatrical speculators to take control of an emerging entertainment industry.

A key factor that contributed to this aesthetic turbulence was the change in audience composition. Indeed, the term 'audience' itself becomes problematic in this period. Those who now gathered in the 'auditorium' were no longer principally occupied with 'listening' but with watching – each other, as well as the stage presentation. The size of the large patent theatres in London reflected an awareness on the part of managers that the population of the metropolis had hugely increased but no awareness at all that the new mix of spectators would bring with it the demise of the old, easy-going familiarity of eighteenth-century theatre-going, which had characterized relationships not only between the spectators themselves but also between spectators and performers. It became obvious that a limited number of officially sanctioned theatres in the rapidly expanding urban areas was insufficient, and so the period saw the struggle between those managers with vested interests and a new breed of theatrical entrepreneurs determined to take the financial risk involved in building new theatres and fully expecting to make money from a newly emerging urban proletariat. These struggles took place in cities like Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Sheffield, Manchester, Birmingham and Liverpool, as well as in London. By 1850 the speculators had won their various battles, though at the expense of the provincial theatrical circuits, which were unable to withstand the centralization of theatrical power in the larger cities and their magnetic influence on the increasing numbers of performers who were jostling for public recognition. Moreover, by 1850, with the attendance of a highly self-conscious middle class determined to see and hear its values embodied and expressed on stage, there is evidence to suggest the re-emergence of a theatre 'audience'.

The period 1790 to 1850 saw the development of the most influential dramatic genre to emerge in the last 200 years. To be sure, English melodrama had its roots in the Gothic Romanticism of the eighteenth century, itself highly influenced by German Romantic writers. Equally important, however, and more enduring, was the influence of French writers such as Pixérécourt and Scribe, who invested melodrama with the democratic values of 'entertaining and instructing' the post-Revolution French 'citizenry'. These influences coexisted, thus enabling English melodrama to become a site of conflict between aristocratic

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and bourgeois values, manifested in the economic struggles between landed gentry or urban capitalists and the cottagers or urban wage-earners that form the basis of much melodramatic playwriting. Because melodrama embodied the conflicts between rich and poor, country dweller and city dweller, it was eminently translatable. When it became possible by the improvements in transport for performers to travel easily, not only between towns but also between countries, melodrama became the *lingua franca* of the English-speaking dramatic world.

The effects melodrama, the size of the theatres and the change in audience composition exerted upon stage presentation and the nature of acting cannot be overestimated. Spectators wanted both fantasy and recognizable reality to be 'realized' on stage with the utmost authenticity, which further blurs the distinction between 'romanticism' and 'realism'. Theatre managers struggled to present in their performances the technical innovations as well as the fruits of geographical and archaeological discovery with which spectators were becoming familiar outside the theatre. Surrounded by rapid change, spectators became increasingly intolerant of a theatre practice that relied on inherited conventions or the recycling of existing resources. This became a further site of conflict, as the new theatre speculators found themselves torn between, for example, cost-cutting on scenery and costuming, and the need to show that they were responsive to their patrons' demands for fresh experiences by investing in new, spectacular displays. Performers were caught in the middle of this conflict. Overly reliant upon an actor–audience relationship of familiarity, and upon 'lines of business' that imposed constraints on performers' creative potentials, they struggled in the early part of the nineteenth century to reconcile the demands of spectators both for novel forms of expressiveness and immediately recognizable behaviour. In order to meet these demands performers clustered around the figures of Edmund Kean and William Charles Macready, and emulated them. This ensured that the traditions of romanticism and realism in performance would continue to exist side by side throughout the period.

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I *Theatre, the law and management practices*

THEATRES AND THE LAW

The period 1789–1843 was characterized by debates, often heated, over the rights enjoyed by patent theatres – Drury Lane and Covent Garden (and to a lesser extent, the Haymarket in London and the Theatres Royal in the provinces) – to monopolize the performances of legitimate plays and the limit placed on the number of theatres within the City of Westminster. Debates also took place over the question whether the state had the power to control the theatrical repertoire through the office of the Examiner of Plays, and over the prerogative of dramatists to exercise control over their own works through adequate copyright protection.¹

The Enabling Act of 1788 had empowered magistrates to grant licences for the performance of certain kinds of entertainments within a twenty-mile radius of London and Westminster, and for the ‘legitimate’ drama in theatres situated outside that area, for a period not exceeding sixty days.² In addition, specific legislation could give letters patent to provincial cities,³ while the Lord Chamberlain maintained absolute control over the City of Westminster. Not only was this administration cumbersome but it also privileged the holders of letters patent. Already proprietors of minor theatres had felt the pressure of the law in the eighteenth century: the Royalty Theatre had been forced to close, and an act to allow the Sadler’s Wells Theatre to extend the terms of its licence was defeated. Both involved advocacy on behalf of patent rights by R. B. Sheridan, who was both a part-owner of Drury Lane and a Member of Parliament.⁴

As the populations of the major centres, especially London, began to increase, the monopoly of legitimate drama exercised by the patent theatres and their resolute opposition to enlarging the number of licensed theatres permitted to perform this drama became irksome to entrepreneurs less interested in the preservation of a ‘national drama’ than in making money. Such prerogatives also appeared to be out of touch with an audience increasingly assertive in its demands for the democratization of entertainment. The struggle to free the stage in London intensified in the period after 1808, which saw the destruction by fire of both the patent theatres in the first decade of the nineteenth century.

The period to 1830 was marked by prosecutions and memorials to the Lord Chamberlain launched by the patent theatres, with particular assaults on the Olympic and Sans Pareil Theatres [5]. At the same time, the period saw an erosion of patent authority, both through the success of the minors in catering for a neighbourhood clientèle by using the ‘illegitimate’ forms of entertainment and through the absorption of those same forms into the repertoire of the patent theatres themselves, thereby making their claims to dramatic exclusiveness

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irrelevant. The minutes of evidence of the Select Committee on Dramatic Literature and its final report [9, 10] demonstrated in 1832 that it was no longer in the best interests of the drama to make it the sole responsibility of a few theatre managers, who had in any case saddled themselves with huge financial liabilities.

The passing of the Theatre Regulation Act in 1843 [17], though it centralized the power of theatre licensing by placing it entirely within the jurisdiction of the Lord Chamberlain, did remove the legislative confusions that had been inherited from the eighteenth century and dissolved the separation between 'major' and 'minor', 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate'.

In 1832 the Select Committee had also discussed censorship and the position of the playwright within an emerging theatre industry. In the first half of the century the real irritation caused by the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays was not so much his interference in excising irreligious, immoral or unpatriotic references, but rather his insistence on examining the scripts well in advance and in charging what were regarded as extortionate fees [6, 14]. This was particularly trying when managers were jostling for patrons, and were often called upon to make rapid changes in programme in cases where entertainments had met with a hostile reception. As far as the playwrights were concerned, the decline in the fortunes of the patent theatres, particularly in the 1820s, the huge salaries paid to stars by managers in their desperate efforts to stave off bankruptcy by offering glittering attractions, and the growth in the number of theatres after 1812, all contributed to insecurity and exploitation.⁵ Moreover, the absence of any protection from dramatic piracy or of any control over their own property made the profession of the playwright extremely difficult to justify [12].⁶

¹ For a brief summary of the situation bridging the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see *The Revels history of drama in English*, vol. VI (London: Methuen, 1975), pp. 40–4.

² See David Thomas and Arnold Hare, *Restoration and Georgian England, 1660–1788* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), no. 193.

³ Newcastle had been granted one in 1787 and others would soon follow: Bath, 1797; Chester, 1798; Bristol, 1799; Kingston upon Hull and York, 1803; Liverpool, Birmingham and Margate, 1807; Edinburgh, 1809. See Watson Nicholson, *The struggle for a free stage in London* (London: Constable, 1906; reprinted New York: Blom, 1966), p. 139.

⁴ See Thomas and Hare, *Restoration and Georgian England*, no. 191.

⁵ See James Boaden, *Memoirs of the life of John Philip Kemble, Esq.* (London: Longman, 1825), vol. II, p. 74 and J. R. Stephens, *The censorship of English drama, 1824–1901* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) pp. 25–50.

⁶ See Stephens, *Censorship*, pp. 84–96.

THE MONOPOLY QUESTION

After the destruction of Covent Garden in 1808 the argument for another theatre, which had been put forward at the time of the Royalty Theatre submission in 1788, surfaced again. It was raised in the Privy Council on 16 March 1810. The petition, however, was denied on 14 April.¹

¹ See Nicholson, *Struggle for a free stage*, pp. 192–224 for a full account of these proceedings and Sheridan's implacable opposition.

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[More information](#)**I The arguments for a third theatre, 1810**

W. C. Oulton, *A history of the theatres of London* (London: Martin & Bain, 1818), vol. 1 (Drury Lane, 16 March 1810), p. 183

Sanguine expectations were still entertained of having a third winter theatre, calculated for *hearing* and *seeing*; the prices of admission to be the same as those of the summer theatre on the Haymarket. The application, however, before the *second* theatre was rebuilt, was certainly premature and injudicious [. . .]

[. . .] Mr Warren, as leading counsel for the petitioners, addressed their lordships (Master of the Rolls, the Attorney General and members of the Privy Council). He contended that the patents, granted to the present theatres, did not go to the exclusion of another; and allowing, for a moment, that they did, it was, in his opinion, doubtful whether the prerogative of the crown could be borne out in granting a monopoly. Monopolies in trade had been declared unlawful: and in amusements, according to the letters of the law, they were also void, the moment the places became the source of trade and profit. The petitions which had been laid before their lordships, from the patentees of the established theatres, denied the necessity of a third theatre, and stated that they had not made more than 6 per cent of their principal. That might be; but there was a question, whether mismanagement had not caused it? This was yet to be proved. It was also urged that his clients had taken advantage of the two unfortunate fires which had taken place; this he denied, and their lordships might be sensible of it, when they reflected on the great increase of the population in London. When those patents were granted, there were not half the inhabitants that are at present to fill them. At certain periods of the year, there was a great increase of strangers in the city, which Covent-garden theatre, as it now is, and Drury-lane theatre, rebuilt, in its greatest magnitude and pomp, could *not* contain. Their argument was, that they have *enlarged their theatres as the population had increased*. Be it so. But their lordships would recollect, while they widened the area of their theatres, they *prevented the public from being entertained*; they put them at such a distance from the stage, that the countenance of the performer could not be discerned, without he distorted the muscles of his face to that degree, that, to those nearer the stage, it appeared ludicrous; the same with the voice; it was so strained, that nature was forgotten. he wished their lordships not to consider the petition of his clients, as theirs alone, but *that of the public*. There were *one million* of persons, in and about this metropolis, who visited theatres; and could it be supposed, that two were sufficient to contain them? It was contended, in the petitions, that even those were not always filled: this was not the fact, for they were filled to more than an overflow, when the entertainments were worthy of the attendance of the public. The application of his clients was for a charter, which, in his opinion, would not give them an advantage over the other theatres, by their being an incorporated body. It was not a corporation for speculation; £200,000 had been subscribed, which would be laid out in the building and decorations; this would always be a sufficient security. It was stated, that it

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would put the subscribers in a better situation than those of the existing theatres, as it relieved them from personal responsibility. This argument, in his opinion, was nugatory; for, by the charter, the incorporated body would be responsible, instead of a single personal security.

The failure to have a third theatre approved in London brought the monopoly situation into sharp focus. The article that follows concentrates on the evasions employed by minor theatres to circumvent the law, the exposure of audiences to inferior entertainments as a consequence, and the dangers that audiences incurred as a result of being forced to travel long distances.

2 An early attack against the patent theatres' monopoly, 1813

J. Lawrence (ed.), *Pamphleteer*, 2 (1813), pp. 382–5

In 1787, John Palmer was threatened by Messrs. Harris, Linley, and Colman, with a prosecution, should he act regular dramas on his newly erected Royalty theatre; and even when it was open for musical and pantomimical performances, an information was laid against Delpini for only crying out 'Roast Beef', while acting the part of clown [. . .]

It is an undecided point, whether theatres improve the morality of a nation; the legislator, however, may be content if they contribute not to deprave it: but it is decided, that good plays might improve the national taste. Why, therefore, when a number of minor theatres are opened, are they prevented from acting the legitimate productions of the best dramatists? Is the legislature afraid of improving the taste of the people? The Surry [*sic*] theatre has, in the opinion of many judges, just the dimensions that a theatre ought to have, and even that of Tottenham Court Road, and the Sans-souci must be magnificent edifices compared to those, on which Shakespeare's works were first performed. But in order to favor [*sic*] the monopolists, the minor theatres are confined to melo-dramas. All unjust regulations will be evaded. Even the lower classes of people have too much taste to relish the farrago of nonsense, to which the liberality of Mr Harris and colleagues would confine them. Some plays of a higher order have been brought forward at the minor theatres; but at the end of a few sentences the harpsichord is sounded, to the surprise of the stranger, who perhaps conceives that the instrument has been touched by accident; and this manoeuvre is practised, that the piece may come under the denomination of a melo-drama [. . .]

These little theatres are more adapted to the representation of many regular dramas, particularly of the *pieces bourgeoises*, than the cathedral theatre of Covent Garden; and as the manager there has shown such a predilection for the Brute Creation, the public would not lose, were he to exchange patents with Astley, whose rights, by the bye, he seems to have infringed. Let the works of Rowe and Otway, Farquhar and Goldsmith, be performed at the Royal Circus, and horses and

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elephants keep possession of Covent Garden:¹ the size of both theatres recommends the exchange [. . .]

The moralists, who judge that more theatres for the regular drama would be productive of vice, consent that the minor theatres should exhibit burlettas, ropedancers, and dancing dogs; as if the young apprentice would be less affected by the allurements of a courtesan, during the feats of a tumbler, than during the performance of George Barnwell.

Beside, though the lobby of each of the great theatres is a focus of vice; youth and inexperience, who cannot have thrown aside a sense of decency, are less exposed to temptation there, than in their walk home to a distant quarter of the metropolis. Could every inhabitant here, as at Paris, find a theatre in his own district, the danger of seduction would be of shorter duration.

¹ This refers to the revival of Colman's *Blue Beard* at Covent Garden, chiefly noted for the employment of an equestrian troop of horses.

3 The effects of the patent monopoly on playwriting, 1812

'Theatrical correspondence', *Examiner* (December 1812), p. 602

If the stage were free, a Dramatist might follow the bent of his genius. He would introduce the characters that his judgment or fancy should prompt; and it would be the interest of the manager to procure performers qualified to do them justice. Whereas now the dramatist is reduced not only to consider the pretensions, the vanity, the abilities of the Actors and Actresses, but their age and corpulency. He must take their measure as well as the stage tailor.

If the Stage were free, every Manager would endeavour to induce an Author of talent to give him the preference; whereas now an Author must go cap in hand to solicit the favour of a Manager; and should he succeed in this, some Actor or Actress may think that the part destined for them would not exhibit them to advantage, and may refuse to co-operate. Few Authors of rank, of liberal sentiment or independent fortune, would enter a green-room cabal. Hence the degeneracy of our Drama. Scenes of high life have been pourtrayed [*sic*] by individuals, who have had little intercourse with good company, and genteel comedy has given place to buffoonery and brogue.

THE LEGAL POSITION OF A MINOR THEATRE

The Sans Pareil was built by John Scott and opened in 1806. In 1819 it would be renamed the Adelphi [76a].

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4 Licence issued to the Sans Pareil, 1817

PRO LC7/10, fo. 60

I do hereby give Leave and Licence unto John Scott esquire to have performed for his benefit, Burlettas, Music and Dancing with Spectacles and Pantomime at his Theatre situated between Heathcock Court and Bullen Court in the Strand within the Liberties of Westminster from Michaelmas next to Easter 1818[.] Given under my Hand and Seal this 10th day of July 1817[.] In the 57th year of His Majesty's Reign.

(signed) Ingram Hereford
Chamberlain

5 Memorial to the Lord Chamberlain by the patent theatres, 1818PRO LC7/4, part 1¹

The joint Memorial of the Proprietors of the two Theatres of Drury Lane and Covent Garden to His Majesty's Lord Chamberlain the Most Noble the Marquis of Hereford against the infringement and abuse of the Licenses [*sic*] of the Proprietors of the Olympic and Sans Pareil Theatres

My Lord,

Engaged as your memorialists are in the arduous duties of managing and supporting the interests of their large and immensely expensive Establishments, Your Lordship may be assured that they would not willingly, or without cause, take up your Lordship's time, by again urging their well founded complaints, against the Proprietors of the Olympic and Sans Pareil Theatres, acting under the Lord Chamberlain's License [*sic*] [. . .]

With [. . .] the Evidence they can produce that the regular Drama is now nightly performing at the above mentioned Theatres, your Lordship must excuse the alarm of the Proprietors of the two Patent Theatres, who, at once, see their long dreaded fears realized and who find their long established Patent rights destroyed, upon the faith of which, a million of money has been of late years embarked in their two Theatres [. . .]

The memorialists then complain about Lord Dartmouth,² the Lord Chamberlain's predecessor and his indiscriminate licensing.

[. . .] Your Lordship may, perhaps, feel averse to alter any act of your immediate Predecessor, but even Lord Dartmouth himself would have been the first to put a stop to such daring infringement of his Licenses [*sic*]. His Lordship never contemplated, that when he granted Mr Astley a License [*sic*] for the Olympic to keep his Horses from the time of the Closing to the Opening of his Amphitheatre that he was