Introduction

The poet, John Keats insisted in his letter to Richard Woodhouse (October 27, 1818), has no self, no character, no identity, but is ever ready to assume identity and enter into a role:

> As to the poetical Character . . . it has no self – it is everything and nothing – It has no character – it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, mean or elevated. It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A Poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence because he has no Identity; he is continually in for and filling some other Body.[1]

To describe how the poetic imagination moves from nonentity to identity, Keats introduces contrasting Shakespearean characters: the innocent Imogen, the evil Iago. Whatever their moral difference, both have equal affective value because "both end in speculation." The poet is always ready for such role-playing, "continually in for and filling some other Body." Keats's theatrical metaphor for entering into character might seem to apply broadly to the assumptions about acting in the period. The successful performer, a Sarah Siddons or a John Philip Kemble, is presumably one who can enter convincingly into role and become that character for the duration of the play. The efficacy of the performance is measured by the degree to which the audience, too, participates in the illusion, identifies with a character's pleasures or pains.

This Romantic dictum of imaginative identification with character is countered by playwrights, actors, and critics alike. Identification with character may be one prevailing proposition, but maintaining an aloof distance is certainly a strong corollary. In *Illusion and the Drama* (1991), I identified an abundance of negative counter trends, political and social as well as aesthetic, at work in the very exposition of illusionist theory.[2] Illusionism, yes, but with anti-illusionism riding tandem. In an era of virtuoso performance, audiences went to the theatre not to see *Macbeth*,

but to see John Philip Kemble play Macbeth and Sarah Siddons play Lady Macbeth.

In the ensuing pages of the introduction, I describe changes taking place in performance, in theatres and audiences, and in the kind of plays that gained popularity. I also anticipate my intentions in the chapters to follow, where I argue that all aspects of theatre and performance were interrelated, and that each aspect involved a fundamental duality or bifurcation. In the first chapter, concerned with audience response, I privilege those eye-witnesses who may be the least representative, the critics. They are unavoidable because they report what they experience. So do the players in their memoirs. Critics disagree, but weighing one report against another may give us a broader and more accurate understanding of performance. This is especially true in the political arena when international events may distort both the representation of, and response to, foreigners on the stage. More than liberal vs. conservative bias, the split is informed by a complex interplay of cultural tradition and translation. Another arena of duality arises from the contrary demands of realism and fantasy, tugging some playwrights into the indulgence of melodrama, others into a documentary fidelity to historical facts. A similar kind of tug-of-war occurred in the very art of acting, the extremes of tempered restraint as opposed to flamboyant histrionics. Furthermore, actors exercised a persistent habit of stepping out of their roles, whether scripted or not. A significant and complex factor in an actor putting on character was the way in which sexual identity might be problematized, especially in comedies that delighted in cross-dressing, and Gothic tragedies that presented villains as perverted sexual predators. Not just character, but also setting was marked by studied displacement, inviting the audience to recognize domestic or national relevance in far-flung places. Another crucial aspect of duality occurred in bridging the traditional distinction between comedy and tragedy. Even as Gothic melodrama gained dominance on the stage, it was riddled with anti-Gothic elements. Horror was accompanied by alternating scenes of comedy. The final two chapters, on the arch-villains Blue-Beard and the Vampire, examine themes of misogyny and domestic violence brought under scrutiny on the Romantic stage as fantasies arising from facts and fears.

In consequence of the prevailing "star" system of the period, actors were inclined to rush through dialogue in order to grandstand with a powerful monologue: Kemble as Penruddick, contemplating his revenge on Woodville,[3] or Siddons as Mrs. Haller, revealing her pangs of guilt upon receiving the letter announcing the visit of the Count and

Countess.[4] With interest focused on the performer, the way was open for the novelty performer, such as Robert "Romeo" Coates, an incredibly bad actor whose performances were so ridiculous that audiences flocked to see him mangle his roles with his wildly garish costumes, flamboyant gestures, fumbled and ad-libbed lines. When he took over from Robert William Elliston the part of Lothario in Nicholas Rowe's *The Fair Penitent* (Haymarket, December 9, 1811), the theatre had to turn away thousands who had lined up to see the mawkish performance. Coates was clever enough to realize that if audiences were laughing at his bad acting he could exploit his natural talent for buffoonery in all of his roles. Charles Mathews mimicked Coates in such comic routines as the "Dissertation on Hobbies, in humble imitation of the celebrated Amateur of Fashion" (Bath, April 28, 1814).[5]

Also rising to fame as a novelty player was William Henry West Betty, "the Infant Roscius" who maintained his success as a child actor from ages twelve to seventeen, after which he outgrew the novelty. Master Betty did not play child roles; rather he appeared on stage in leading adult roles. With a stage debut as Osman in Aaron Hill's *Zara* (Belfast, August 19, 1803), he went on to play Douglas, Rolla, Romeo, and Hamlet in the theatres of Dublin and Cork. The following year, at age thirteen, he had invitations to play in Glasgow and Edinburgh. In London he appeared first as Achmet in John Brown's *Barbarossa* (Covent Garden, December 1, 1804), a role that had originally been played by David Garrick in 1753. He then commenced an engagement in the title role of Home's *Douglas* (Drury Lane, December 10, 1803). For his twenty-eight nights the box-office brought in the unprecedented sum of £17,000.[6] I will return to Master Betty in Chapter 7 to examine his performance as Osmond, the vicious sexual predator of *The Castle Spectre*.

Another theatrical phenomenon of the age was the one-man show, a virtuoso comic performance in which the skilled mimic and quick-change artist would shift rapidly from one role to another. The three great masters of this sort of comic routine were John Bannister (1760–1836), Charles Mathews (1776–1835), and Joseph Grimaldi (1778–1837).[7] Bannister was given an opportunity to develop his skills as a solo performer in George Colman's *New Hay at the Old Market* (Haymarket, June 9, 1795). In this metatheatrical spoof on the London theatres, Bannister played an out-of-work actor, Sylvester Daggerwood, who tries to convince the would-be playwright and the theatre manager of his talents. He sings and mimics a variety of performers. Playing alongside of Bannister in subsequent performances, John Caufield, in the role of Apewell, also showed

off his uncanny skill in mimicking other actors. Bannister's role as Daggerwood gradually evolved into a one-man show, *Bannister's Budget* (Drury Lane, 1807), in which he played a dozen different parts.[8]

Charles Mathews, the most popular of the solo performers, displayed incredible versatility as an impersonator. His performances in *At Home* began at the Lyceum theatre in 1808. It had no fixed plot or cast of characters, but in all of its variations Mathews played every character, carrying on dialogue between two, three, and four characters. Although the performances involved rapid changes of costume, he also could rely simply on his changes in voice to become a different personality. Mathews' repertory for *At Home* not only featured a multitude of characters; it also combined mimicry, storytelling, recitations, improvisation, quick-change artistry, and comic song.[9]

Another master of the one-man show was Joseph Grimaldi, the most celebrated of English clowns. Very different from those of either Bannister or Mathews, Grimaldi's pantomime performances drew from the old tradition of *commedia dell'arte* and exploited the current popularity of Harlequinades. His fiabesque *Harlequin and Mother Goose; or the Golden Egg* (Covent Garden, 1806) was often revived and adapted throughout his career.[10] In spite of the marked differences in their performances, all three solo performers invited the audience to watch the subtleties of role-playing, the acting ingenuity of the self putting on other identities, other personalities. Watching the actor acting was a common response to all performance in the period, whether of Kemble, Siddons, Coates, Master Betty, or Mathews. The audience who came to Mrs. Webb's benefit (Haymarket, July 21, 1786) were less interested in watching *Henry IV, Part I*, than in watching Mrs. Webb play Falstaff. As is well known, when Sarah Siddons performed her signature role as Lady Macbeth for her farewell to the stage (Covent Garden, June 29, 1812), the curtain was dropped at the close of her mad scene (v.i). This was the finale that the audience had come to see, and they refused to allow the play to continue.

In spite of a new attention to historical accuracy in costumes and stage design, and a new emphasis on special effects to enhance stage illusion, there was also a relentless exposure of both the art and artifice of performance. Hanna Cowley, in the preface to her comedy *The Town Before You* (Covent Garden, December 6, 1794), complained that audiences no longer cared for the development of character in a play. They wanted the instant gratification of comic antics: "The patient developement of character, the repeated touches which colour it up to Nature, and swell it into identity and existence (and which gave celebrity to Congreve), we

have now no relish for."[11] A century had passed since Congreve's day. What had changed? Everything – audience, acting, stage design and costumes, the plays, and the theatre itself. Each of the changes was inextricably entangled with all the others. The major factor was the huge growth in the London population. By 1750 the population of London had reached almost 700,000, and by 1800 over a million. It had become the largest city in the world. By 1821, 1,378,947 were crowded into London's urban area. Industrialization and the rising middle class had their inevitable impact on the theatres of London. While melodrama, novelty acts, spectacle, and special effects on stage entertained and distracted, prostitutes and pickpockets were at work in the audience. Patrons of the Haymarket and the Adelphi theatres were wise to be especially wary.[12] In addition to thieves and prostitutes inside the theatre, beggars flocked round the entrance. The Royal Coburg, built in 1818 on the Waterloo Road in the dangerous neighborhood of New Cut, south of the Thames, attracted patrons willing to exercise necessary caution.[13]

New theatres were built and old theatres were refurbished, and with every modification more and more seats were added. When David Garrick performed at Drury Lane, he could elicit a roar of laughter from the audience by arching an eyebrow. Under Richard Brinsley Sheridan's ownership, Drury Lane was demolished and rebuilt (1791–4). When it reopened, on 12 March 1794, technical difficulties with the stage had not yet been resolved; a programme of sacred music was offered on opening night. Another month passed before the first dramatic performance could be offered. The play was *Macbeth*, with John Philip Kemble and Sarah Siddons in the leading roles (April 21, 1794). The new Drury Lane was a cavernous theatre, accommodating more than 3,600 spectators.[14] Sarah Siddons called it "a wilderness of a place." The size was not designed for superior reception of dramatic performance, but only for larger audience and larger box office revenue.[15] Sturdy iron columns supported five tiers of galleries. The stage was 83 feet wide and 92 feet deep, flanked by sixteen boxes, four within the proscenium arch on either side, and four more above the stage doors left and right. James Boaden did not consider the vastness discomforting. He argued that it could easily manage a full house, bringing in "a nightly receipt of £700," but that the audience could be well distributed so that the house did not "look deserted on a thin night."[16] More especially, Boaden was pleased with stage machinery that could accomplish all the wonders of special effects, with "vast and beautiful" scenery that "rose from below the stage or descended thither." Even the costume wardrobe had been richly augmented.[17]

Other theatre-goers were less sanguine than Boaden about the huge size of the new Drury. John Byng was among those who lamented the "warm close observant seats of Old Drury." Byng attended *The Siege of Belgrade* (May 6, 1794), a comic opera by James Cobb and Stephen Storace, and found that much of the dialogue could not be heard.[18] Not entirely vanquished, but seriously challenged, was the sense of intimacy between performer and audience. The consequences were inevitable. No longer able to rely on subtle gesture and vocal nuance, acting style had to employ broader histrionics and maintain volume in its vocal projection. Productions tended more toward spectacle and pantomime.

Such a spectacle was Kemble's *Lodoiska* (June 9, 1794).[19] At the opening of Act II, Lodoiska, played by Anna Maria Crouch, looks out from a tower upon the "streams, that round my prison creep" (II.i), hoping to be rescued by her lover, Count Floreski, played by Michael Kelly. From roof-top tanks, water flowed down a rocky stream into a wide expanse traversed by a draw-bridge. In spite of the great attention Kemble had given to the stage design, Kelly reported that the final scene almost ended in disaster:

> [W]hen Mrs. Crouch was in the burning castle, the wind blew the flames close to her; but she still had sufficient fortitude not to move from her situation; – seeing her in such peril I ran up the bridge, which was at a great height from the ground, towards the tower, in order to rescue her; just as I was quitting the platform, a carpenter, prematurely, took out one of its supporters, down I fell; and at the same moment, the fiery tower, in which was Mrs. Crouch, sank down in a blaze, with a violent crash; she uttered a scream of terror. Providently I was not hurt by the fall, and catching her in my arms, scarcely knowing what I was doing, I carried her to the front of the stage, a considerable distance from the place where we fell. The applause was loud and continued. In fact, had we rehearsed the scene as it happened, it could not have appeared half so natural, or produced half so great an effect. – I always afterwards carried her to the front of the stage, and it never failed to produce great applause, – Such are, at times, the effects of accident.[20]

The accident turned out to be a spectacular *coup de théâtre*, but it might have left Kelly and Crouch with broken bones and third-degree burns. The stage of the new Drury was equipped with a metal curtain that could be dropped to stop the spread of fire, and the roof-top water tanks also had a practical purpose in dousing fires. As the production of *Lodoiska* made evident, even without the accident, the audience was treated to startling special effects.[21] Most importantly, it was a huge audience. With a full house of 3,600 spectators, fewer than half would have been able to see and hear clearly. But they would see the peril of the lady in the burning tower

and be thrilled by the heroic rescue. Acting utilized the same sort of dumb-show gestures that were later characteristic of the silent movie era. A large part of the new audience were from the mercantile and working class. This was an audience who welcomed spectacle and melodrama.

Neither the water tanks nor the metal curtains were of any help in halting the fire that destroyed Drury Lane on February 24, 1809. Financially ruined, Sheridan relinquished management of the theatre to Samuel Whitbread, who oversaw the rebuilding. Designed by Benjamin Dean Wyatt, Drury Lane reopened with a production of *Hamlet* (October 10, 1812) with Robert Elliston in the title role.[22] The new theatre seated 3,060 people, about 550 fewer than the previous building, but the only concession toward intimacy was not in the size, but in the increase in box seating, intended to bring in more revenue. Still an extremely large theatre, Drury Lane's productions continued to rely more on scenery and effects than on dialogue and acting.

Covent Garden had been the smaller of the two patent theatres, but when it burnt down on September 20, 1808, its new architectural design by Robert Smirke increased its capacity by over 1,100, so that when it reopened on September 18, 1809, it seated over 3,000 people, almost as many as Drury Lane.[23] Just as he had fifteen years earlier at Drury Lane, the actor-manager John Philip Kemble opened with a performance of *Macbeth*. He also raised seat prices to help recoup the cost of rebuilding. The new prices were vehemently opposed, and the audiences disrupted performances. The Old Price Riots lasted over two months, until the management finally acquiesced and restored the lower rates.

From the 1790s through the 1820s theatre performances adjusted to the expectations of the larger middle-class audiences. The period saw the rise of melodrama and a pervasive musical presence. Historical costumes and elaborate set designs provided a new verisimilitude. Stage illusions were enhanced by innovative mechanical devices. Phantom images projected by the *laterna magica* and the virtual images reflected by giant parabolic mirrors were made possible by advances in lighting technology, which progressed rapidly during the era: the Argand lamp of 1780; the Clegg lamp of 1809; the gas lamps of 1815; the intense illumination of oxygen- and hydrogen-fed lamps of 1819; and, by the 1830s, the lime light.[24] Equipped with a tank measuring 40 × 100 feet, holding 8,000 cubic feet of water, Sadler's Wells was able to offer scenes of shipwrecks and maritime battles, such as *The Siege of Gibraltar* (April 2, 1804). Astley's Amphitheatre featured a ring for the performance of equestrian melodrama.[25]

In the ensuing nine chapters, I give primary attention to the varied dynamics of performance and audience response, beginning by establishing an entrance into the theatre through the critic and dedicated affecionado. Chapter 1, "Periscopes into the theatre," introduces John Waldie, a prolific theatre critic who not only published his reviews in newspapers and theatre journals of the period, but also kept an extensive journal of his attendance at the theatres with accounts of hundreds of plays. Waldie often saw the same popular play many times, and each time he noted the differences. Although his focus was on British theatre, he traveled extensively and was familiar with the theatres in France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. He was especially alert to foreign plays and foreign players on the British stage. As a proprietor of the Theatre Royal in Newcastle, he was familiar with the performances in the provinces as well as in London. His eye-witness accounts, alongside those of Leigh Hunt, William Hazlitt, and other critics, documented the paradoxical response of enthralled engagement and aloof detachment that was presumably experienced by a large portion of the audience and mirrored, as well, the peculiarities in the acting of many of the most successful performers of the era.

Chapter 2, "Nationalism and national character," examines the opposing tensions of Francophilia and Francophobia in plays of the period. London theatre, which had strong ties to France during the preceding centuries, now turned increasingly to Germany, and also to Spain and Italy, for its dramatic matter. Even as performances began to reveal more and more importation – from the Germany of Kotzebue and Schiller; from the Italy of Goldoni, Gozzi, and the revival of *commedia dell'arte* – French sources and the representation of French characters fell under the sway of the factional responses in Britain to the French Revolution, the Terror, the rise and fall of Napoleon, and the Bourbon Restoration. The representation of French character on the British stage between 1790 and 1830 was complicated by the continued popularity of French playwrights and the success of Parisian actors and actresses in London. Critical attention has been given by other recent critics to the ways in which the theatre in Paris responded to the political issues of the Revolution, and to how the theatre in London monitored and mediated the political events in France. Moving beyond these earlier studies, the present chapter examines the performance of French character, and representation of the emotional, intellectual, moral, and ideological attributes of French national identity, male and female.

Chapter 3, "Genre: the realism of fantasy, the fantasy of realism," studies the contrasting functions of the heightened illusionism of the

age. On the occasion of his production of *King John* (Covent Garden, March 3, 1823), John Philip Kemble recalled his earlier production (Covent Garden, February 24, 1804) with the boast that he was a major instigator of the movement toward historical accuracy in costume and design.[26] In addition to period costumes, that "accuracy" was wrought by a series of magnificent flats painted with landscapes, camp scenes, and battlefields, as well as architecturally detailed renditions of the walls of Angiers (Act II), the gates of the castle (IV.iv), and Swinstead Abbey (V.vii). "The catastrophe took place in a night scene, lighted by torches, within *The Orchard at Swinstead Abbey*, and the final curtain fell to a 'Grand Symphony in the Orchestra'."[27] Even in the effort to conjure a realistic historical setting, Kemble and other theatre managers could not resist displaying the showmanship involved. The illusionism made itself equally apparent alongside the realism. As examples of the intermixing of the contraries in plays of fantasy as well as in documentary drama, this chapter will examine Edward Fitzball's *The Flying Dutchman* (Adelphi, January 1, 1827) and William Thomas Moncrieff's *The Shipwreck of Medusa* (Royal Coburg, June 19, 1820).

In *Hamlet*, Polonius introduces the players with praise of their ability to perform in any genre: "The best Actors in the world, either for Tragedie, Comedie, Historie, Pastorall: Pastorall–Comicall–Historicall–Pastorall: Tragicall–Historicall: Tragicall–Comicall–Historicall–Pastorall: Scene individable, or Poem unlimited. *Seneca* cannot be too heavy, nor *Plautus* too light. For the law of Writ, and the Liberty, these are the only men" (*Hamlet*, II.ii). Shakespeare's jest, of course, concerns the mixing of dramatic forms. More extreme than the combinations imagined by Polonius were the mixed forms that actually evolved during the Romantic era. For example, James Robinson Planché identified his production of *Blue Beard* as "A Grand Musical, Comi-Tragical, Melo-Dramatic, Burlesque Burletta."[28] The mixing of realism and illusionism, tragic and comic, had become the norm.

Chapter 4, "Acting: histrionics, and dissimulation," traces the radical shifts in acting style from Garrick to Kemble and Siddons, and again to Kean and Macready. Bringing together the actors' own descriptions of their performance (from memoirs and diaries), the stage directions in prompt-books, the poses in contemporary theatre paintings, the gesture and body movement prescribed in books on acting and oratorical delivery, this chapter examines how the norms of behavior are established and then broken in fits of rage or madness. The transgression of sanity into madness, the comforts of pleasure into pain, are studied especially in

the acting style of Sarah Siddons. The dynamics of gesture are complicated in the dishonesty of the villain, in the hypocrisy of the unfaithful lover. Acts of dissembling and duplicity raise special problems in the covert/overt art of telling lies with body language: as in Iago's deception of Othello, the audience must discern what the immediate auditor on the stage fails to perceive. Over the course of the Romantic period, the histrionics of dissimulation became less subtle and covert; villainy was painted in broader strokes. Machiavellian cunning lost its polish and became more blatant.

Following the elucidation in the previous chapter of the language of gesture in enacting truth vs. falsehood, lapses of sanity, normal vs. abnormal behavior, Chapter 5 on "Transvestites, lovers, monsters: character and sexuality" continues to examine acts of dissimulation in terms of trans-sexual disguises, sexual identity, and motivation. Shakespearean characters, as August Wilhelm Schlegel observed, are frequently required to put on disguise (*Verkleiden*) or to pretend to some beliefs or feelings not their own (*Verstellen*).[29] The duplicity is literally a doubling, in which both self and other are revealed in the role-playing, with boundary-crossing juxtapositions of gender, race, or rank. With all female roles played by men, Elizabethan playwrights had abundant occasion to introduce jests of sexual identity. This practice of transvestite casting was further complicated by the frequent stage ploy of a man playing a woman playing a man: Rosalind becomes Ganymede, Viola becomes Cesario, Imogen becomes Fidele.[30] Following the Restoration, when women were allowed to play the female roles, the cross-dressing did not cease, but took on new dimensions of titillation and exploration of sexual identity. The disguise of females dressed as males coexisted with the representation of males of compromised masculinity. The fop and preening dandy were stock characters in comedy.[31] By the end of the eighteenth century, the manners of the voluptuary and the homosexual had acquired a new psychological dimension. Having begun with a survey of the dramatic function of cross-dressing – male-as-female, the more frequent female-as-male, and the representation of ambiguous sexual identity – this chapter also discusses the "love or money" dilemma in comedy, then turns to the representation of sexual malevolence, and the psychological motivation for those melodramatic villains relentless in their acts of perversion, rape, and excess. It considers too the extent to which character may confirm or oppose misogynist and homophobic attitudes.

Chapter 6, "Setting: where and elsewhere," examines not the dissembling of character but the dissembling of the stage and setting. With its