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978-0-521-54790-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to English Theatre, 1660-1900

Peter Thomson

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
English Theatre, 1660–1900*

This introduction aims to share with readers the author's enjoyment of the turbulent 240-year history of a theatre that tried, often against the odds, to be 'modern'. In each of its five parts, it deals successively with history and cultural context, and with the plays and the actors who caught the imagination of their era. Peter Thomson's text, always approachable, is enriched by quotations and carefully selected illustrations that capture 'the spirit of the age' under consideration. Beginning with the reopening of the playhouses under licence from Charles II, Thomson introduces the modern English theatre by breaking off at key dates – 1700, 1737, 1789 and 1843 – in order to explore both continuity and innovation. Familiar names and well-known plays feature alongside the forgotten and neglected. This is a reading of dramatic history that keeps constantly in mind the material circumstances that produced, and sometimes oppressed, a supremely popular theatre.

PETER THOMSON is Emeritus Professor of Drama, University of Exeter.

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*This one had better be for my grandchildren: Fraser, Joe, Abi, Eliza
and Greta. If there are more to come, I'll write another book.*

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Preface

In offering an introduction to nearly 250 years of theatrical activity in Britain, I have tried to maintain a balance between the contribution of individuals and the historical and material conditions in which those contributions were made. The book is divided into five historically determined parts, but history is, of course, a continuum, and discreteness illusory. There are overlaps and, no doubt; many more inconsistencies than I am aware of. Part One is disproportionately long, because it was after the Restoration that the lines of development were laid down, and it seemed important to establish the origins before encountering the variations. Quotations, where they enrich the text rather than sustaining it, are separated out by shading. Illustrations have generally been chosen to serve the same purpose of enrichment. Although the pattern of chapters is common to all five Parts, I have allowed my different responses to each of the periods covered to dictate the choice of material represented by the subheadings of each chapter. It would be a foolhardy historian who claimed to be definitive. The proper function of an introducer is to bring two parties together in a friendly atmosphere. That is what I have endeavoured to do.

There is no bibliography, though some of the writing that has informed my thinking is mentioned in the text and its footnotes. Much more is not. Even a selective bibliography of books and essays on theatre and drama during the years between the restoration of Charles II and the death of Queen Victoria would need to be longer than this book. As far as possible, I have concentrated on plays available in modern editions, though some of the best of these are out of print. Years of cultural snobbery have discouraged familiarity with the popular drama of the past (as if Shakespeare were not a popular dramatist!), despite the obvious fact that popular plays provide unique access to vanished tastes, to what William Hazlitt called the 'spirit of the age' in attempting to unify his 1825 collection of essays on twenty-five prominent contemporaries. The spirit changes under pressure from external forces, and in less than twenty years Richard Hengist Horne was calling his parallel collection *A New Spirit of the Age* (1844). The cultural shift from the age of George IV to that of Victoria

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is nowhere more openly displayed than in the theatre. It is such shifts that this book aims to identify.

If there is anything unusual about my approach, it may be the outcome of my divided interest in history, playwrights and actors. That divided interest is reflected in the chapter divisions of each Part of the book.

Acknowledgements

The writing of this book has been a solitary experience, but I am in debt to all the authors who have enlivened it. My ideas and impressions have been formed over years – by teachers and scholars, some of whom have also been colleagues. No one can pretend to *know* 240 years of theatre history, but anyone who cares to can accumulate ideas and impressions. It was only on typing the final full stop that I remembered the opening sentence of Tom Henn's first lecture in an undergraduate series on 'English drama'. It went something like this: 'For the purposes of this lecture-course, I will assume that you are familiar with the work of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Terence, Plautus, the Wakefield Master, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Webster, Middleton . . .' and on and on he went. I am in Tom Henn's debt for the generosity of his assumption, but I am not sure that I went to his second lecture. I know enough now to know how little I know, and I am grateful to the hundreds of people who have alerted me to the delights of ignorance. Ignorance is, after all, one of the comparatively few things that we can *do* something about. Janette Dillon spurred me on by sharing with me, chapter by chapter, her own groundbreaking *Introduction* to pre-Restoration drama and theatre. Her example has encouraged me to look afresh at my old prejudices. But my principal debt is to Sarah Stanton, who invited me to write the book in the first place, and who has been my adviser and critic throughout the process.