

Cambridge University Press

0521630525 - The French Revolution and the London Stage, 1789-1805

George Taylor

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

On 5 June 1783 the Montgolfier brothers launched a balloon that rose on a pillar of hot air above a bonfire in Annonay, central France. On 15 October their assistant, Pilâtre de Rozier, became the first man to fly. His balloon ascended above Paris, and, although the flight lasted only four and half minutes and rose only eighty-four feet, it provided its fearful occupant with an overview of a city which in the next ten years was to experience violent changes that have reverberated to the present day.¹ The development of aviation might be considered to have been more momentous, but the ideas and strategies hammered out in the forge of the French Revolution have just as decisively shaped the values and consciousness of the last two centuries. Like the Montgolfiers' balloon, the theatre of late eighteenth-century London may also appear to have been a gorgeous and flimsy package floating free above the city. But, like the balloon, it was more than just a fabulous spectacle to delight ignorant spectators; its flight provides us with a vantage point from which to view and analyse changes happening below, for, just as hot air kept the Montgolfiers' fragile craft afloat, so the shape and speed of theatrical change were invisibly determined by the heat of political and cultural conflict. This study will examine both the spectacle and the forces that shaped it. Examples of performance, drama and theatrical innovation will illustrate how public entertainment responded to the turbulence in the intellectual climate that socio-political changes induced, for, even though London did not suffer the traumas of Paris, it underwent a major cultural crisis.

By 'crisis' I mean that not only were there unprecedented material changes but that the ideologies available could no longer explain their development. The philosophies of the Enlightenment, which had originally inspired the revolution in France, were confounded by the excesses of the Terror and Napoleonic expansionism, while the

Cambridge University Press

0521630525 - The French Revolution and the London Stage, 1789–1805

George Taylor

Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *The French Revolution and the London stage, 1789–1805*

benevolence of the Sentimental Movement was overwhelmed by harsh economic mechanisms that led to rural dislocation and urban deprivation across much of Europe. New material circumstances created both new audiences and new ideological opinions, thus causing a redefinition of both high art and popular entertainment to reflect changes in the values and expectations of all classes. In England the tension between repressive government, popular discontent and intellectual detachment was not as violent as in Revolutionary France, but the shock waves of revolution and war stimulated the most palpable class conflict in Britain since the Stuart period.

Finding it impossible to make sense of the inexorable mechanism of these political and economic juggernauts, many individuals in both France and England withdrew from social debate into individual angst and spiritual introspection. In time new debates and ideologies were to evolve, but in the meantime repression, reaction and disengagement were the preferred strategies of a culture in crisis. When artists can no longer represent the world in coherent patterns, the recognition of which engenders in the viewer a sense of identification and reassurance with the familiar, they may resort to the use of metaphor. They may rework experience into weird and intriguing patterns that distance the audience from reality, sometimes as a relief from its harshness, but often as an indirect subliminal means of making emotional, if not intellectual, sense of life's cruelties. In *Hard Times* (1854), written some forty years after the Napoleonic Wars, Dickens depicted the utilitarian industrialist Thomas Gradgrind, who believes only in facts, confronted by Fleary, manager of a travelling circus, who protests: 'You can't deny the people "Fancy".' This dichotomy between fact and fancy suggests a divorce between cultural expression and social reality. Yet theatre is a communal art addressing the experiences and concerns of a wide audience and must forge a link between the two. In the so-called 'great ages' of theatre the social or ideological homogeneity of audiences made a communal and cathartic experience of tragedy possible, but in the context of social division, like that of Dickens' Victorian mill town, mirth could not be unrestrained nor the ripeness of the tragic moment recognised – as the oppressed mill-hand, Stephen Blackpool, complained, 'Tis all a muddle!'²

The Victorian theatre produced no convincing tragedy and precious little intellectual comedy, and indeed throughout much of

Cambridge University Press

0521630525 - The French Revolution and the London Stage, 1789-1805

George Taylor

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

the century theatre itself was widely disparaged. Intellectual sophisticates, the socially fashionable, the religious, utilitarians and radicals condemned the theatre as trivial, extravagant, irrelevant, vulgar or immoral. The distribution of theatres fragmented into East End and West End; spectacular and intimate; circus, pantomime and opera. Each had its own establishment and each its own corner of the market. In the mid-eighteenth century there had been fewer theatres but they were more communal in their appeal. Although audiences were divided according to class between pit, box and gallery, all came to see the same shows, for within one programme there was a variety that not only satisfied the different groups but satisfied them all – mainpieces, comic or tragic; afterpieces, satirical, farcical, musical or spectacular; interludes of music, song and dance; the wit of prologue and epilogue and above all the attractions of the performers, all received plaudits from all corners of the house. Critics might make sharp comparisons, but little of the programme was dismissed as ‘trash’, or ‘immoral’, or irrelevant ‘fancy’.³

Terms like ‘rubbish’ and ‘nonsense’ are particularly suggestive to the cultural historian. Disagreement as to what is trash and what is treasure suggests cultural crisis, when values are put under question by social stress or political conflict. The class divisions of the Victorian era were notorious for producing such stresses, and many of their cultural expressions have been condemned as hypocritical, pretentious or escapist. Although a period of relative stability, it was essentially a repressive stability, reform being gradually extracted by shrewd negotiation rather than by revolutionary confrontation. The Victorians knew power lay not in philosophy, nor even in faith, but in the inexorable machinery of market forces. Of course, there were idealists, moralists, mystics even, but orthodox Victorian culture marginalised them as ‘unrealistic’, fit only for fairytales and melodrama. The idealists themselves were tempted to hide their discontent behind a respectable front of conformity, recognising the importance of being earnest. In mid-eighteenth century England such deception was unnecessary. Tories despised Whigs; apprentices envied their masters; court fops, city merchants and country squires valued different lifestyles, they might mock each other and certainly enjoyed theatrical parodies of each other’s class, but there was a cohesion and tolerance, a belief that the same motives drove courtier and highwayman, that parson and squire had the same interests, and that philosopher, scientist, scholar and artist were all in pursuit

Cambridge University Press

0521630525 - The French Revolution and the London Stage, 1789–1805

George Taylor

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *The French Revolution and the London stage, 1789–1805*

of different aspects of the same truth. They called it Enlightenment. As E. P. Thompson has shown in his *Customs and Practices* – which explored the period preceding that which he memorably categorised as *The Making of the English Working Class* – those on the ‘lower’ margins of society had not yet found a distinctive voice; their discontent found safe and symbolic expression in rowdy games and festive sports.⁴

Doubtless, my impressionistic sketches of the two mid-century periods are open to many exceptions, but I intend a more searching analysis of the age between Enlightenment and earnestness. At the turn of the century political upheavals, centred in France, affected the whole of Europe; economic developments, centred in the north of England, began to spread across the world; and the stresses of urban life, centred, for this study at least, in London but replicated in cities everywhere, led to feelings of displacement, alienation and social fragmentation. Historians have repeatedly considered how these revolutionary stresses shaped ‘the modern world’: defining class conflict as a clash of irreconcilable interests; undermining the accepted rationality of religion by revealing its dependence on faith rather than intellectual certainty; and setting the uniqueness of the individual against the generalities of society. Being of a century that has experienced many revolutions, we find it difficult to understand, even imagine, the preceding era and the unifying philosophies of the Age of Enlightenment, when a few scientific observations seemed to provide immediate access to ‘universal principles’, an autocratic monarch’s ‘enlightenment’ seemed the route to social justice, and the rebellious colonials of New England felt confident enough to enunciate ‘self-evident truths’ as the basis of their constitution. And yet this ‘unified’ period produced a gallery of highly opinionated, original, even eccentric individuals – Samuel Johnson, Horace Walpole and Oliver Goldsmith; Lord North, John Wilkes and Charles James Fox; Quin, Garrick and Macklin – all in heated disagreement but, nevertheless, all engaged in a seemingly coherent discourse with a shared confidence that ‘common-sense’ was demonstrable and accessible to all humanity.

Of course, their individual disagreements and disputes were a rehearsal for the irreconcilable contradictions of the Revolutionary period, and a close examination of mid-eighteenth-century ‘civilised stability,’⁵ could well undermine its apparent coherence. Indeed there were several discordant voices that anticipated and prompted

Cambridge University Press

0521630525 - The French Revolution and the London Stage, 1789-1805

George Taylor

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

the violent clashes of the later age: John Wesley and Joseph Priestley, Thomas Paine and Lord George Gordon, Adam Smith and Thomas Arkwright. And there were shifts too in the position of women, who were beginning to question the male domination of the Enlightened Age – though it was not until the period of crisis that individual voices made their disruptive presence felt: Wollstonecraft, Edgeworth, Inchbald, Siddons. Perhaps these individuals still represented a minority of nonconformity, but in the 1790s individual voices became shriller and their ideas more persuasive to a different section of the population, thus contributing to social fragmentation and creating what today we call ‘identity politics’. In retrospect one may dispute whether this concern for personal identity was the spume on the groundswell of fundamental class conflict, or whether it provoked of itself profound redefinitions of purpose and perception. In either case, the artistic culture of the Romantic period has long been categorised as one of introspection – individuals driven by persecution into exile or by misappreciation into a fantasy world of ‘otherness’.

The discovery and exploration of Otherness is one of the most significant developments of the Revolutionary age.⁶ Although pictures, poems and even interior decoration exploited the exotic East or the mysterious past for images to disturb and challenge the mundane and ordinary, it was in the theatre that the exhibition of the Other took on its most spectacular forms – scenic pantomimes, Gothic melodramas, fairytale ballets and antiquarian productions of Shakespeare. In the eighteenth century the past and the foreign had been generalised into a decorous classicism of stately pillars and nodding plumes, but on the Romantic stage whole new dramatic genres evolved in order to present barbaric or sublime images, and to unfold stories of unnatural violence and providential mystery. Consciously or unconsciously these dramas reflected the discoveries of the age, not only actual expeditions, such as that of Captain Cook to the Antipodes, or Napoleon’s ill-fated invasion of Egypt, but the explorations of the mind in an age that tore down the Bastille, invented the guillotine, discovered the power of steam and the principles of electricity. Time too was being disrupted, traditions dying as unprecedented events took place. Sons could no longer expect to follow in their fathers’ footsteps, inheriting their land, learning their trades. Some sank into undeserved penury; others achieved undeserved wealth. Kings and bishops had been over-

Cambridge University Press

0521630525 - The French Revolution and the London Stage, 1789–1805

George Taylor

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *The French Revolution and the London stage, 1789–1805*

thrown in France, the king of England was mad, and his son, the regent, a grotesque voluptuary. Dr Mesmer could overrule the conscious will, and it was *almost* believable that Dr Frankenstein could reconstitute a living being.

All art functions on a metaphorical level, but at certain times, it is especially through metaphor that the complexities and mysteries of life can be apprehended. Politicians, philosophers and economists may have to hammer out rational interpretations of the seeming chaos of material reality, but for artists, and, more particularly, for their bewildered audiences, the naturalistic depiction of probability can seem inadequate. Only an evocation of the barely possible provides a satisfying response to the contradictions of a world which 'self-evident' principles can no longer explain. Thus we must tease out the metaphorical resonances of Grimaldi's clowning, Monk Lewis' maniacs and the passionate histrionics of Siddons and Cooke. A significance must be found for the 'fraternal' relationships in the plays of Holcroft (a committed radical), the besieging of castles in those of Colman (a patriotic manager), the mythological status of rapists (the monastic Ambrosio and the oriental Blue Beard), and the phenomenon of 'natural genius' as exhibited in the youth of Master Betty and in the skill of Astley's horses. Of course, it is unlikely that the significance that we might find was consciously intended by performers or even recognised by audiences at the time, but the elucidation of the resonance and possible meaning of cultural metaphors is integral to the methodology of the present study.

When analysing the statistics gathered for his invaluable work, *Theatre, Opera, and Audiences in Revolutionary Paris*, Emmet Kennedy argues that previous historians overstated the political content and influence of the theatre during the Revolution.⁷ But, although 'uncommitted' plays far outnumbered those dealing with specifically political issues, his analyses of changes in emphasis and attitude show that the impact of events on theatrical taste was crucial – though indirect. Historians can fall into the same trap as political censors in trying to identify topics, stories and speeches that specifically refer to issues of the day, because the relationship is usually more subtle than specific precisely because it is unintentional. For instance, Pierre Desforges' *Le Sourd, ou L'Auberge Pleine* was the most popular French play of the period (1789–99), a comedy in which a man pretends to be deaf in order to gain accommodation in a crowded inn. Kennedy accurately summarises the plot and its

Cambridge University Press

0521630525 - The French Revolution and the London Stage, 1789-1805

George Taylor

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

reliance on conventional tropes and situations: ‘Stock eighteenth-century themes are skilfully exploited here: marriage of love over marriage of interest, bourgeois frugality and prudence over aristocratic honour, testy master-servant relations in which money is the main factor, and the psychology of deaf-mutes . . . It has no political message, only a few social banalities.’⁸ At first glance it does seem very traditional, and, no doubt, contemporary audiences read little into it. But all these ‘stock themes’ have implications in identifying the political sympathies of the audience, and some of the new situations or jokes had a more than stock resonance in the context of its first performance in 1790 – the legitimate travellers’ room and the host’s chair at table are ‘usurped’ by an outsider pretending to be deaf. Did the revolutionaries of 1790 seem ‘deaf to reality’? Or just the provincial ones travelling to Paris? If their policies were a trick, should we admire their cunning or their effrontery? The play posed no such political questions directly of its audience, but its very popularity raises them for the cultural analysts. My own curiosity is raised particularly by the metaphor of deafness being adopted as a strategy for coping with a material problem – particularly as the number of dramatic characters who are deaf, mute or blind steadily increased during the period under investigation.

But understanding the Age of Revolution is not all a matter of ‘dream interpretation’ in which fears and aspirations find fantastic forms. The other side of cultural crisis is the desperate affirmation of ancient certainties – the reflex response of the conservative and reactionary. Edmund Burke’s reading of history was not one that celebrated Otherness but proclaimed stability and tradition. The juvenile genius of the Younger Pitt was dedicated to political repression. Even if certain scientific developments were challengingly mysterious, such as Mesmer’s ‘animal magnetism’, most were essentially rational and pragmatic. For instance Charles Bell’s analysis of emotional expression was a far more objective approach to the psychological.⁹ It found embodiment in the statuesque attitudes of Emma Hamilton and the passionate gestures of Sarah Siddons – whose son translated a treatise on rhetorical gesture.¹⁰ In fact the techniques of acting were becoming more ‘scientific’, even as the effect of performance became more emotional. Perhaps the most mechanistic system to emerge from the period was the ‘classical economy’ of capitalist acquisitiveness, as developed from Adam Smith by Malthus and Ricardo, a system that made sense of cultural

Cambridge University Press

0521630525 - The French Revolution and the London Stage, 1789–1805

George Taylor

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *The French Revolution and the London stage, 1789–1805*

chaos and spiritual confusion by reducing everything to a commodity and its price – the harsh quantifiable facts of Thomas Gradgrind. This capitalist philosophy was to be the dominant ideology to emerge from the whole Revolutionary epoch, and it was manifested in the theatre by the increasingly exploitative management of both companies and buildings, which undermined the ensemble tradition and fragmented the market into exclusive audiences patronising specialised theatres. One protest against these market forces, the O. P. Riots of 1809, was a theatrical manifestation in its own right, a carnival of catcalls, costumes and rhetoric. Financial ‘reality’ won the day, but the O. P.s, representing the traditional liberty of ‘free-born Englishmen’, contested the liberty of a capitalist entrepreneur to ‘do as he liked with his own property’.¹¹

The theatricality of the O. P. Riots reflected the equally performative nature of the Revolutionary *journées* on the other side of the Channel, and this perception of the O. P. Riots as suggestive of wider political and cultural conflicts typifies my methodological approach to this study. In order to examine the relationship between the cultural activity of theatre and the unprecedented political and social developments of the Revolution, I will not unfold a seamless narrative of chronological ‘theatre history’. Rather, a number of exemplary figures, events and performances will be described, and, by analysing why particular artistic choices and decisions were made, I will suggest how the material realities of the time affected both ideological positions and artistic forms. Although this runs the risk of imposing interpretations, rather than drawing out originally intended meanings, I believe that in scholarship transparent subjectivity is infinitely preferable to an illusion of objectivity.

My own method is fundamentally rooted in principles of historical materialism, which continually raise the question of in whose interest events take place, and look for the ways in which material conditions influence ideological explanations. But I would not attribute every particular development to a crude class conflict, especially as I will often be identifying bewildering contradictions between the intention of individual agents and the result of their actions or the effect of their cultural creations. When discussing theatrical production my focus will not always be on the most influential aspects of political or social change, but on how the apparently trivial minutiae of the entertainment business reflected ideological attitudes that were being determined elsewhere on the wide stage of the world. Thus I

Cambridge University Press

0521630525 - The French Revolution and the London Stage, 1789-1805

George Taylor

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

will employ some of the sensibilities of New Historicism to refine my essentially materialistic analysis. This might seem an uneasy combination of methodologies, but, as Catherine Gallagher suggests in her essay, 'Marxism and New Historicism': 'New historicism confronts Marxism now partly as an amplified record of Marxism's own edgiest, uneasiest voices. Those Marxists who listen carefully may hear many of their own unanswered doubts and questions. To dismiss such challenges as the mere echoes of a reactionary defeatism would be a serious mistake.'¹² In the current debates on historiography there have been insinuations that, on the one hand, Cultural Materialists are more concerned with a committed political stance than with 'real' historical analysis, while, on the other, New Historicists acknowledge no stance at all and indulge a dilettante fascination with the fragments and margins of 'real' history. Inevitably all histories, however 'new' their techniques, are deeply influenced by, even if not conscientiously engaged in, the political and cultural issues of their own time, and it is naïve to suggest that a concern for the byways, rather than the grand highways, of history is an apolitical, or even reactionary, exercise. As Stephen Greenblatt avers, a New Historist's concern with minutiae does not replace analytical interpretation, but,

the interest lies not in the abstract universal but in particular, contingent cases, the selves fashioned and acting according to generative rules and conflicts of a given culture. And these selves, conditioned by the expectations of their class, gender, religion, race and national identity, are constantly effecting changes in the course of history. Indeed if there is any inevitability in the New Historicism's vision of history it is this insistence on agency, for even inaction or extreme marginality is understood to possess meaning and therefore to imply intention.¹³

However, whilst attracted by the oblique perspective of New Historicism, I will continually look to the ultimate shift in material power between social classes to explain the twists and turns of apparent contingency. This does not necessarily mean a search for some 'abstract universality' – indeed both terms were anathema to Marx himself. His was a dialectical analysis of material reality, in which individual consciousness is defined by an interactive process, in which both the canon of subjective masterpieces and the unselfconscious products of popular culture act as determinants and reflections, intimately involved in the wider fluctuations of political power and the creation of what Gramsci defined as the ideological

Cambridge University Press

0521630525 - The French Revolution and the London Stage, 1789–1805

George Taylor

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *The French Revolution and the London stage, 1789–1805*

hegemony. Without keeping a weather eye open for hegemonic developments, the recounting of ephemeral events and examples can easily lapse into a valueless positivism, or the unhelpful relativism of some of the New Historicists. In this revolutionary period traditions of morality and social status, the radical philosophies of the Enlightenment, and new feelings of inequality and oppression, were so chaotically thrown together in a kaleidoscope of events and arguments, that I find Raymond Williams' analysis of how ideologies change particularly valuable in assessing which certainties were crumbling and which were hardening into the new capitalist hegemony that was to dominate the nineteenth century.¹⁴

Two theatre historians whose work demonstrates vividly how social realities, critical discourses and cultural production interact, and who both deserve my acknowledgement here, are Joseph Roach and Bruce McConachie. Roach's analysis of how changes in scientific thinking, particularly biological and psychological perceptions, have effected the processes and appreciation of performance, will be much cited in chapter 5 below. But his whole approach to the creative interplay between ideas and practices has particular relevance to a period when ideas were continually being challenged. McConachie's own area of research is, unfortunately, later than my own, but his *Melodramatic Formulations* describes precisely how dominant social and political thinking finds expression in dramatic form, and conversely how the formulae of theatrical entertainment can itself effect the patterns of people's thinking about their own society.¹⁵

The sense of 'cultural crisis' arising from an ideological void, where no rational explanation can be formulated to fit the experience of social or political reality, has bedevilled historians. From generation to generation – even decade to decade – different explanations of the Revolution have been propounded. These inevitably reflect the political preoccupations and conflicts of the historians' own times. I can claim no freedom from such influences, but to identify my own position, I must express a distrust of those accounts of the 1970s and 1980s that tried to deny any explanation based on 'class interest'. François Furet's *Penser la Révolution Française* (1978), W. Doyle's *Origins of the French Revolution* (1980) and even Simon Shama's *Citizens* (1989), all tend towards the 'unpredictable chapter of accidents and miscalculations'¹⁶ school of thought. Of course individuals disagreed, groups and classes were divided, and