

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

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PART I

English comic actors and their
representation

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1 | The low comic actor

This book looks at the ways in which English low comic actors were represented in the visual arts in the late-Georgian and Regency periods, at the ways in which such representations became part of the visual culture of their period, and at the impact of visual representation and art theory on prose descriptions of comic actors. It also considers what the actors themselves represented, in terms of national and regional identities, and even what Hazlitt called ‘the sublime of tragedy in low life’. The particular focus of this study is on the low comedian and largely, but not exclusively, on male rather than female performers. Surprisingly little work has been undertaken on the comic performers of this period, yet their contemporary popularity is beyond dispute. Their likenesses are to be found in prints, portraits, paintings, illustrations in periodicals and editions of plays, and, in the case of John Liston, in an extensive series of ceramic likenesses. These actors were as celebrated in their own time as their contemporaries John Philip Kemble, Sarah Siddons and Edmund Kean. If many of the plays in which they performed have not survived in the repertory, this is in part because their own creative skills as performers were essential to the roles that were as often as not specially written for them.

The low comedian was a comic actor or actress who played countrymen, farmers, sailors, old men and women, servants and serving maids, tradesmen, shopkeepers, Irishmen, Scotsmen, Frenchmen, Jews and other nationalities, and exaggerated roles in burlesque. The low comedian was thus a specific type of performer, specializing in such roles as Touchstone, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Bottom, the first Gravedigger, Dogberry, Launce or Autolycus in the plays of Shakespeare, as Scrub in *The Beaux Stratagem*, Tony Lumpkin in *She Stoops to Conquer* or Bob Acres in *The Rivals*. Low comic roles were embedded in most comedies and dominated farce, although these genres become increasingly difficult to separate from each other in the period under discussion. Moreover, some actors moved effectively between low and high comedy, while others remained very much *sui generis*. In this period certain roles, such as Menenius, Polonius, Sir Antony Absolute, Sir Peter Teazle and Hardcastle were just as likely to be played by comic actors with a penchant for low comedy as Tony Lumpkin or Touchstone. A few

actors, such as John Bannister (1760–1836), seemed to move effortlessly between low comedy and genteel comedy, a generic distinction discussed by John Hill in *The Actor*.¹ The problem of definition is further complicated by the existence of the light or eccentric comedian, such as William Lewis (1748–1811), often playing more volatile and socially mobile roles, but also sharing many of the traits of the low comedian. This is especially true of those actors who became known for their representation of fops, macaronis and dandies. Some of the comic actors discussed in this book were criticized for buffoonery and excess, yet were also praised for truth to nature and for pathos. Sometimes they imitated life, sometimes they exaggerated it. Yet even exaggeration was founded upon observation.²

The history of English comic acting is an almost unbroken history of traditions and conventions, gradually altered by innovation and originality, but invariably retaining links with the past. The focus here, however, will be thematic, concentrating on selected case studies of individual actors rather than a chronicle history. Yet English comic actors were not exactly solo performers – they worked as an ensemble both with each other and with actors specializing in different types of role. Comic actors often inherited their own special lines of character from their predecessors, and a successful London career at one or other of the two patent theatres, Covent Garden or Drury Lane, usually depended not only on prior achievements in low comic roles in the provinces or during the summer seasons at London's Haymarket Theatre, but also on an appropriate vacancy arising in one of the London companies. Nor was any actor an exact carbon copy of his predecessors, for actors' successes also depended on original and specific talents. Comic actors were often compared to their older counterparts, but they invariably developed a reputation based on their own idiosyncrasies. Yet, whereas tragic actors and actresses were often admired for bringing something new to their performance of established roles, comic performers initially had to measure up to the old actors, for whom, as the critics William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb clearly demonstrate, there was considerable nostalgia. To do absolute justice to low comedy acting since the theatres reopened in 1660,

¹ John Hill, *The Actor: A Treatise on the Art of Playing* (London, 1750), pp. 269–79. Hill argues that actors require the same degree of genius and merit to perform low comedy roles as they do to play in genteel comedy, even if they are representing nature unpolished by education. The low comedian's task is to 'copy the ridiculous habits and peculiarities' of the sort of people he has to enact, emphasising their most characteristic folly, while not jarring with the rest of the piece'.

² For a useful, if inconclusive, discussion of these issues see Ernest Bradlee Watson, *Sheridan to Robertson: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century London Stage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), pp. 312–47.

it would be necessary to look back to James Nokes, William Penkethman, Joe Haines, Thomas Doggett and many others, who fall outside the scope of this study.

The low comedian was something of an artist. Drawing on observation and the imitation of nature, enhanced by imagination and their own creativity, low comedians created portraits based on the world around them, although often accentuated for stage effect. Thus, when we look at portraits or prints of these performers in character, we may well ask who is creating what: in many ways the finished outcome represents a collaboration between actor and artist. This is especially pertinent in reference to a number of actors featured in this study. Most of the comic actors discussed in detail in this book were painters themselves, collected paintings or were acquainted with artists. William Parsons (1736–1795), who had originally trained as an architect, exhibited still life paintings; John Emery (1777–1822) regularly submitted maritime paintings to the annual Royal Academy exhibitions; and John Bannister had trained at the Royal Academy, as a contemporary of the caricaturist Thomas Rowlandson, whose portrait he had drawn. Bannister also collected paintings, as did Charles Mathews (1775–1835), whose collection of theatrical portraits now hangs in the Garrick Club. Bannister was acquainted with the artist David Wilkie, as was John Liston (1776–1846), who sat as a model for one of the characters in *The Ale House Door* (now better known as *The Village Holiday*). George Morland sold to Joseph Munden (1758–1832) sketches he had made of cattle while sitting in Munden's country cottage in Kentish Town. Munden also collected drawings by Turner, Girtin, Cousins, Cipriani, and Bartolozzi. And John Edwin (1749–1790) arguably used a painterly approach to the delineation of his roles.

A key to understanding the relationship between comic acting and painting lies in the numerous references to William Hogarth and to David Wilkie in accounts of comic actors of this period. Although it would be absurd to confine discussion of comic actors to notions of comic painting, as defined by Hogarth, or of genre painting (or pictures of everyday life), as practiced by Wilkie, the impact of art theory on theatrical criticism in this period is significant. Hogarth and Wilkie are often the touchstones by which comic performance is measured. In turn the representation of actors in the portraits and conversation pieces of Johan Zoffany; the portraits and theatrical scenes of Samuel De Wilde, Thomas Wageman and others; the paintings of George Henry Harlow and George Clint; and the caricatures of George and Robert Cruikshank must also be taken into account. This is not an exhaustive list of artists who depicted the actors featured in this study, but

the ways in which such artists depicted comic performers often amount to a critique and/or a celebration of their performance style. The market for prints, engravings and other objects is significant: the print trade expanded considerably during the eighteenth century to the extent that London dominated the European market by 1800.³ Affordable souvenirs and mementoes of performers, in some instances, became as important in memorializing the low comedian as the group and individual portraits exhibited at the Royal Academy or by the Society of Artists.

The actors and actresses discussed in detail in this book represent only a small proportion of the low comic performers active on the London stage during the late-Georgian and Regency periods. However, they include some of the more significant comic performers of their time. William Parsons, particularly renowned for his performance of old men, and John Bannister, whose stage persona regularly evoked a sense of genial Englishness, commenced their acting careers before Garrick's retirement in 1776. Isabella Mattocks (1745–1826) and Jane Pope (1744–1818), who will be referred to briefly, established their careers as comic performers in the late eighteenth century, both drawing considerable critical attention through their performance of domestic servants and the older women of comedy and farce. Joseph Munden and subsequently John Liston took low comedy to extremes, both treading close to caricature. Munden was very strong in testy old men, whereas Liston established prototype cockney characters decades ahead of Pierce Egan's and Charles Dickens's rather different stereotypes. John Emery did for the crafty, cunning Yorkshireman what Liston (with whom he often performed) did for the vulgar, conceited cockney. Charles Mathews, particularly through his one-man shows, enacted multiple identities, not only British and Irish, but also French, German and even African-American.

Prior to the 1780s actors such as Ned Shuter (1728–1776), Thomas Weston (1737–1776), and Thomas King (1730–1805) were among the outstanding comic actors of their time, whereas John Quick (1748–1831) and Richard Suett (1755–1805) were extremely popular in the late eighteenth century. Shuter created the role of Hardcastle and Quick the role of Tony Lumpkin in *She Stoops to Conquer* in 1773; Quick was also the original Bob Acres in Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775). Leigh Hunt called Suett 'the very personification of weak whimsicality . . . with a laugh like a peal of giggles,'⁴

³ John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 453.

⁴ Leigh Hunt, *The Town its Memorable Characters and Events*, 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1848), II, 108.

while Hazlitt, referring to the role he played in Hoare's *My Grandmother*, called him 'the old croaker, the everlasting Dicky Gossip of the stage'.⁵ Also popular were James William Dodd (1740–1796) in foppish roles – his Sir Andrew Aguecheek was particularly admired – and the mercurial William Lewis, who excelled in characters such as Goldfinch in Holcroft's *Road to Ruin* and Jeremy Diddler in Kenney's *Raising the Wind*. In the early nineteenth century, William Dowton (1764–1851) and the younger William Farren (1786–1861) established themselves as serious comic actors, who brought a more natural and restrained approach to their performances of the crusty old men of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century comedy.⁶ John Fawcett (1769–1837) is also important, excelling in eccentric low comic roles such as Caleb Quotem in *The Review* and Pangloss in *The Heir at Law*, both by George Colman the younger. Other comic actors include John Harley (1786–1858), who was often compared to Fawcett, and Robert Keeley (1794–1869), both of who carried over the traditions of Georgian low comic performance into the Victorian era.

Notions of low comedy performance were heavily gendered. Women found it more difficult to shine in comedy than men, according to biographer and dramatist James Boaden. Whereas the male low comedian could choose to resort to fairground buffoonery, the comic actress had 'nothing beyond the mere words she utters, but what is drawn from her own hilarity, and expression of features, which never submits to exaggeration'.⁷ Although there is some justification for Boaden's view, he himself tended to be prejudiced about what actresses might or might not be permitted to do, as is evidenced in his comments on male impersonation, finding Mrs Edwards's Macheath and Lydia Webb's Falstaff 'vile, beastly and indecent'.⁸ In Boaden's opinion female to male cross-dressing on stage was only acceptable when there was absolutely no gender ambiguity involved, as he makes clear in his comments on Dorothy Jordan.⁹ Indeed, deviations from acceptable notions of femininity, whether in appearance or behaviour, tend to be censured. Growing older or putting on weight often adds to the celebrity of male low comedians: in actresses the same changes may lead to criticism or ridicule.

⁵ *London Magazine* I (January 1820), 67.

⁶ See David L. Rinear, 'From the artificial towards the real: the acting of William Farren', *Theatre Notebook* 31 (1977), 21–8, for a discussion of Farren's acting.

⁷ James Boaden, *The Life of Mrs Jordan including Original Private Correspondence and Numerous Anecdotes of Her Contemporaries*, 2 vols. (London: Edward Bull, 1831), I, 71.

⁸ James Boaden, *Memoirs of the Life of John Philip Kemble Memoirs Esq., including A History of the Stage, from The Time of Garrick to The Present Period*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Hurt, Rees, Orme, Brown & Greene, 1825), I, 334.

⁹ Boaden, *The Life of Mrs Jordan*, I, 46.

Although some actresses were low comedians by choice, others were con-signed to low comedy roles more frequently as they aged or their physical appearance changed.

Most comic actresses played a wide range of roles, only some of which might be considered low comedy. Thus, whereas the actors discussed in this study may largely be defined as low comedians, the actresses are less easy to class in this way. Dorothy Jordan was certainly a comic actress, but one can hardly class her as a low comedian, although she played low comedy roles on occasion. Frances Abington (1731–1815) and Elizabeth Farren (1759–1829), despite their prowess in comic roles, cannot be classed as low comedy actresses either. Nevertheless, there were many women’s roles that can clearly be classified as low comedy: chambermaids such as Cowslip in *The Agreeable Surprise* (John O’Keeffe); older women such as Mrs Hardcastle in *She Stoops to Conquer* or Mrs Malaprop in *The Rivals*; burlesque figures such as Queen Dollalolla in *Tom Thumb* (Henry Fielding, adapted Kane O’Hara), Distaffina in *Bombastes Furioso* (W. B. Rhodes) or Tilburina in Sheridan’s *The Critic*; Audrey in *As You Like It* or the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*. There were also a number of actresses such as Isabella Mattocks, Jane Pope and Mary Ann Davenport (1759–1843) – ‘the appearance of her jolly red face was the presage of mirth, and her scream the signal for a roar of laughter’, wrote William Robson¹⁰ – and Maria Gibbs (1770–1850), who specialized in such roles, although they were accorded far less critical attention than their male contemporaries. Other actresses such as Julia Glover only began to specialize as they grew older, while others again played too wide a range of parts to be easily classified at all. Eliza Vestris (1797–1856), who played pert chambermaids and often undertook male impersonation in burlesque, might also be classed as a low comedian, although representations of Vestris are strongly influenced by her sex appeal, confirming again the gendered criteria for some aspects of low comic performances by actresses.

The relationship between female comic performance and its visual representation is discussed in detail by Gill Perry in *Spectacular Flirtations*. Although she considers the broader spectrum of female comic acting in the eighteenth century, she notes that:

Apart from the coquettes and country girls, wayward spouses, shrews, termagants, fortune hunters, fishwives and old maids are among the stereotyped female characterizations to be found in eighteenth-century comic narratives. Often rooted in the conventions of both Shakespeare and Restoration Drama, such feminine roles were

¹⁰ William Robson, *The Old Play-goer* (Fontwell, Sussex: Centaur Press Ltd, 1969), p. 83.

reworked in late eighteenth-century theatrical culture, informed and developed to no small extent by the work of a growing body of female playwrights, among them Susannah Centlivre, Hannah Cowley and Elizabeth Inchbald. In its attempts to represent ordinary nature, the comic genre frequently focused attention on the domestic or ‘interior’ domains of family life and personal relationships, and the social and class-based tensions which drove such private domains. Feminine roles of mother, wife, mistress, maidservant and so on, often the lynchpins of domestic life, were open to scrutiny and parody in this genre. It is through the complex attribution of such (gendered) characteristics that eighteenth-century comedy exposes social inequalities, tensions and hypocrisies.¹¹

Perry argues that such stage characterizations were not only rendered more complex by the on-stage presence of the actress, but open to further ‘re-interpretation and reconstruction through painted and graphic imagery’.¹²

Graphic representations of actresses in low comedy roles range from the highly sexualized to the grotesque, although the majority of representations arguably fall somewhere between these two extremes. Low comedy performers, male and female, often but not always lacked the sort of features that might have rendered them appropriate for tragic or romantic leads, but the grotesque bodies and grotesque physiognomies of male low comedians receive far more attention from artists and illustrators. Whereas some attempt at normalization is apparent in portraits of male low comedians out of role, normalization is prevalent in the representation of many female low comedians both in and out of role. Just as Boaden argues that the actress has less scope for exaggeration than her male peers, so artists themselves generally (but not always) are restrained in their portrayal of low comedy actresses.

* * *

This study focuses on a generation of comic actors who were aware of precedent, but who arguably had a disregard for theoretical models and for mere imitation of older actors, even when they were quite clearly aware of both. Thus, although reference may be made in passing to Le Brun and Lavater, the assumption that their work provides prescriptive formulae for comic performance during the period under discussion does not tally with the degree of originality and real-life observation that was emerging among many of the actors discussed here. Certainly John Bannister was aware of Le Brun and Charles Mathews of Lavater, while both Bannister

¹¹ Gill Perry, *Spectacular Flirtations: Viewing the Actress in British Art and Theatre 1768–1820* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 129.

¹² Perry, *Spectacular Flirtations*, p. 129.

and Parsons were said to belong to the ‘School of Garrick’, which might suggest a technique grounded in imitation and precedent. Yet, as this study argues, what makes actors such as Bannister and Parsons interesting is their originality and their uniqueness, just as the artist David Wilkie’s appeal lies in his departure from ‘text book formulae’ for expression, the absence of theory in his work and the sense that his art relied on empirical observation rather than precedent. This is not to ignore, of course, the capacity of actors such as Mathews or Bannister to imitate their predecessors in specific types of entertainment such as their one-man shows.

The two ensuing chapters provide background on the impact of visual culture and theatrical portraiture on the representations of comic actors and on the theoretical and critical discourses that determined how comic actors were perceived and written about. However, a study of the representation of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century comic actors must inevitably commence with Hogarth, particularly with reference to his impact on critical discourse around comic performance in the period covered by this book. Those who portrayed these actors in both paint and print were heavily influenced by Hogarth’s work and his opinions, and even by the critical controversies stirred up in his wake by Joshua Reynolds and others. It is not altogether surprising that two of the first critics to write seriously about comic acting, Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt, were also advocates of Hogarth, at a time when his star was no longer in the ascendant.