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978-1-107-09885-5 - Comic Acting and Portraiture in Late-Georgian and Regency England

Jim Davis

Frontmatter

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## Comic Acting and Portraiture in Late-Georgian and Regency England

The popularity of the comic performers of late-Georgian and Regency England and their frequent depiction in portraits, caricatures and prints is beyond dispute, yet until now little has been written on the subject. In this unique study Jim Davis considers the representation of English low comic actors, such as Joseph Munden, John Liston, Charles Mathews and John Emery, in the visual arts of the period, the ways in which such representations became part of the visual culture of their time, and the impact of visual representation and art theory on prose descriptions of comic actors. Davis reveals how many of the actors discussed also exhibited or collected paintings and used painterly techniques to evoke the world around them. Drawing particularly on the influence of Hogarth and Wilkie, he goes on to examine portraiture as critique and what the actors themselves represented in terms of notions of national and regional identity.

JIM DAVIS is Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Warwick. As a researcher he specialises in British theatre during the long nineteenth century. He has published a biographical study of John Liston, an edition of the plays of H. J. Byron and an edition of the diaries of the stage manager of the Britannia Theatre, Hoxton, Frederick Wilton. With Victor Emeljanow he co-wrote a prize-winning study of nineteenth-century theatre audiences, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing 1840–1880* (2001), and more recently he has edited a collection of critical essays on *Victorian Pantomime* and a volume on Edmund Kean. He has also co-convened theatre historiography groups for the International Federation for Theatre Research and for the British Theatre and Performance Research Association, and is an editor of the journal *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*.

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I come now to those other Men Actors, who, at this time, were equally famous in the lower Life of Comedy. But I find myself more at a loss to give you them, in their true and proper Light, than those I have already set before you. Why the Tragedian warms us into Joy, or Admiration, or sets our Eyes on flow with Pity, we can easily explain to another's Apprehension: But it may sometimes puzzle the gravest Spectator to account for that familiar Violence of Laughter, that shall seize him, at some particular Strokes of a true Comedian. How then shall I describe what a better Judge might not be able to express? The Rules to please the Fancy cannot so easily be laid down, as those that ought to govern the Judgment. The Decency too, that must be observed in Tragedy, reduces, by the manner of speaking it, one Actor to be much more like another, than they can or need be supposed to be in Comedy: There the Laws of Action give them such free, and almost unlimited Liberties, to play and wanton with Nature, that the Voice, Look, and Gesture of a Comedian may be as various, as the Manners and Faces of the whole Mankind are different from one another. These are the Difficulties I lie under.

Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber* (reprinted  
Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968)

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