

Prologue

Strollers without Borders

William Hallam heard the gossip about John Moody's success in Jamaica with irritation. His own theater in Goodman's Fields had been continuously harassed by the authorities for the unlicensed competition it gave to the royal theaters of Drury Lane and Covent Garden and sniffed at by critics for its propensity to spice up plays with tumblers and dancers entr'acte. Now, in July 1750, he faced a court summons that seemed likely to result in financial ruin. That the Cork adventurer and probable Jacobite Moody should have the freedom in the colonies to perform the drama unmolested and, still more, that his brogue-inflected performances of Shakespeare and Rowe should win "universal acclaim," as one American friend had put it, seemed a species of luck so undeserved that it should have eluded even an Irishman.

Some eighteen months later, after several appearances at Middlesex quarter sessions, the payments of fines and the failed solicitation of the local magistrates, Hallam was forced to close down the Goodman's Fields Theatre. His business had failed, but his conduct and standing were such that his creditors let him keep his props, scenery and costumes and discharged him from his debts. Now Moody's example excited, if also still exasperated, the forty-year-old theater producer, for it heralded new opportunities. If that pretender Moody could dazzle the colonists with his limited gifts, what remarkable good fortune could a genuinely talented troupe expect? Hallam rounded up his former company members, including his brother Lewis and Lewis's brilliant actor wife, Susan, as well as a few other newly unemployed thespians of his acquaintance to propose the new venture: touring the British colonies of America. He would be the backer, supplying scripts, scenery and costumes, as well as some start-up capital; Lewis was to be manager; Susan, their children and the ten other adults would constitute the rest of the company and share its profits. The repertoire would include the current stock of Shakespeare, Otway, Rowe, Addison and other examples of English genius; the actors' status as London performers would add to the appeal, for rustic American

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provincials would rush to purchase tickets for the play to prove that they were not the uncivilized bumpkins the English liked to imagine. As the *Virginia Gazette* of June 12, 1752, put it, in a paragraph that flatteringly rendered equivalent the taste, discernment and status of metropolitan and colonial sensibility,

THIS IS TO INFORM THE PUBLIC

That ... [the manager] from the New Theatre in Goodmans Fields, is daily expected here with a select Company of Comedians, the Scenes, Cloaths, and Decorations are all entirely new, extremely rich, and finished in the highest Taste, the Scenes being painted by the best Hands in London are excell'd by none in Beauty and Elegance, so that the Ladies and Gentlemen may depend on being entertain'd in as polite a Manner as at the theatres in London, the Company being perfected in all the best Plays, Opera's, Farces, and Pantomimes, that have been exhibited in any of the Theatres for these ten years past.

William Hallam secured the company's passage on the *Charming Sally* of Captain William Lee, slave trader, conveyer and lover of the play. On this particular sailing, the ship had no slaves until it reached Barbados but did take some aboard there to deliver to Virginia and New York, docking in Virginia on June 2, 1752. The *Charming Sally* then proceeded up north to New York with "a parcel of likely slaves, Men, Women and Children" according to the same newspaper report. Perhaps as Mrs. Lewis Hallam practiced Portia's famous plea on the quarterdeck – "The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven" – the human cargo chained together in the hold, lacking the faintest possibility of relieve for themselves or their progeny, may have glimpsed in this assemblage a ghostly preface to their own bloodier New World experiences. In the meantime, those allowed on deck, working as sailors and servants, endured, memorized or perhaps were even amused by the performance of *The Merchant of Venice* or *The Fair Penitent*.

"This should give that upstart Moody a run for his money," Hallam probably thought as watched the *Charming Sally* depart from the Thames docks. What he couldn't have known was that, despite assurances to the contrary, the Hallam company would fall almost immediately upon hard times in the colonies, that it would ultimately merge with a remnant of Moody's Jamaican company in the tropical lowlands, and that Moody himself would escape to London, eventually to be "discovered" by David Garrick, where he became famous for his Irishmen in plays such as *The Committee* and *Love à la Mode* at Drury Lane. Of more lasting importance for the story told here, Hallam's company had embarked on a journey that added eccentric and unexpected currents to the already hectic flows of transoceanic exchange, hydraulic propulsions that extended English theater across the Indian Ocean and the Pacific basins, as well as the Atlantic

littorals, creating an imperial culture in circulation, where culture, identity and futurity traveled and were transformed by their polycultural audiences. Strolling players fetched up not only in Kingston but also in Calcutta, Bengkulu, St. Helena and Port Jackson, among other places in the overseas British world, critical cargo in the relentless “trade” that propelled waves of goods, peoples, skills, knowledge and strategies of both rule and survival into propinquity, marking territory, collapsing distance and assuaging homesickness across hemispheres and oceans. In theaters composed of paper, bamboo and mud, as well as more permanent materials, audiences were assembled, disassembled and repurposed as Britons on the move carried their theatrical practices with them, flouting conventions and embracing privations that only underscored playing’s instrumental role in empire’s formation.

Oceans were the highways of the eighteenth century, connecting relations, marking and distributing domains of belonging and attachment, slavery and freedom, life and death. Indigenous travelers had long taken such crossings in stride with world-making effects. The strolling players of empire retraced their routes and limned in new ones in order to stage both quotidian and monumental performances across the globe, arriving as embodied archives of knowledge and practice that transformed peripheries into historical stages where alternative collectivities were enacted, imagined and lived. Here Europeans, Amerindians, Africans, Asians and Australians jostled for freedom, love and power, and the enslaved and the free, rich and poor alike, performed tales of tribulation, memory and redemption, but for audiences and in conditions that were not usually of their own choosing.

Introduction

Britain's Theatrical Empire

There is no Human Invention so aptly calculated to the forming a Free-born people as that of Theatre.

Richard Steele, *The Tatler* (1710)¹

[O]ur whole life is like a *Play*: wherein every man, forgetful of himself, is in travail with expression of another. Nay, we so insist in imitating others, as we cannot (when necessary) return to ourselves: like Children, that imitate the vices of *Stammerers* so long, till at last they become such.

Ben Jonson, *Timber, or Discoveries* (1641)

An impossible but necessary, indeed an everyday affair, mimesis registers both sameness and difference, of being like, and of being Other. Creating stability from this instability is no small task, yet all identity formation is engaged in this habitually bracing activity in which the issue is not so much staying the same, but maintaining sameness through alterity.

Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993)²

Why did Britons get up a play wherever they went? Steele's reflection on the role of the stage in producing a "free-born people" suggests one entry into what can be a surprisingly complex question. As most of its eighteenth-century inhabitants would attest, England was the place where liberty thrived and slavery had no place. And as theater proponents argued heatedly, theater was the institution best suited to express that distinctiveness. The hallowed links between English liberty and

¹ My use of this quotation, which is taken from Joseph Roach's seminal *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York, 1996), signals my enormous debt to this book, the most important study of Atlantic World performance culture to have been published in the last century, and since.

² In the following pages, I use "mimesis" to refer to the wider processes of world-making and "mimicry" to refer to lower-level or individual imitation. For mimicry as dangerous to colonialism, see Homi K. Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London, 1994), 121–31. Here I'm more interested in how mimesis encompasses memory, emulation and imitation that originate with and are carried by, and in, the body – somatic modes of expression that historians, perhaps understandably, tend to ignore.

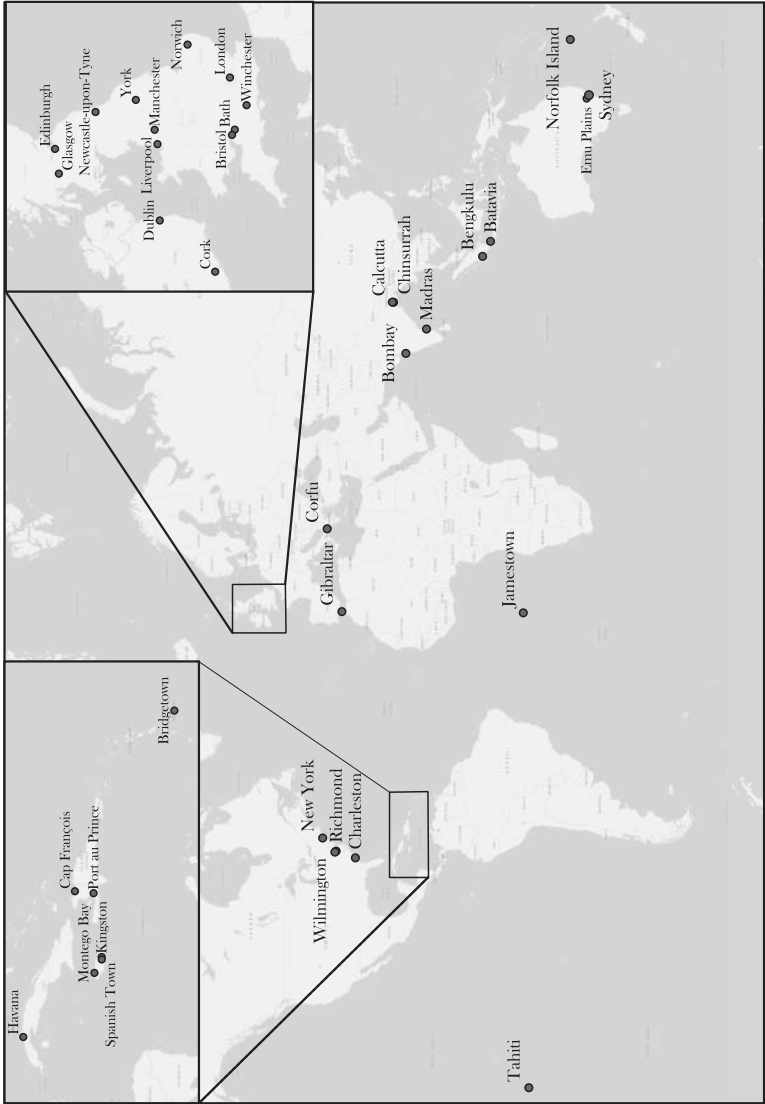
a flourishing theater were celebrated in pamphlets, essays and tracts, caricature and verse, prints, and dramatic texts themselves, but they took on their most potent and (it was thought) didactic form in live performance itself, where the representation of the “national character” was the ultimate end of all demonstrations of mastery in portraying the other. If theatrical performance constituted a “rite of Britishness” and “acting British” meant getting up a play, then it also revealed British culture’s embracing attachments to alterity, an alterity that included the people, cultures and histories adjacent to the narratives of the nation-state that playwrights since Shakespeare had retailed to commercial audiences and that British and non-British people, at the horizons of empire, engaged with as a practice of everyday life.³ This supposedly distinctive British affinity for theatrical performance was incorporated into the web of collective narratives to become as “natural” a component of British identity as the oft-proclaimed birthright of liberty.⁴ Bearing the facsimile of manners of a “free-born people,” then, theater became a vital component of a migrant British culture, carried across the seas to flower in places where in fact slavery was common, and so helped to spawn new kinds of nations and peoples in turn.

This book tracks some of the novel and colorful journeys that British theater embarked upon over the course of the eighteenth century, from nation to empire and back again. It examines unstudied circuits of theatrical performance extending across the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans to encompass Kingston (and other urban centers of Jamaica), Calcutta, Fort Marlborough (Sumatra), St. Helena and Port Jackson (New South Wales), as well as London and archipelagic provincial towns (see Maps I.1 and I.2). In each space, the performance of British drama helped consolidate a national and imperial culture that was being forged both within and beyond the nation’s borders. Yet in crisscrossing political and oceanic boundaries and circulating texts, bodies, ideas and practices meant to incarnate the best of the English and, secondarily, British character, the stage also mobilized competing ideas about authority, cultural difference and national belonging that emanated from the small as well as the great across the flow of practices of everyday life in Britain’s expansive domains. Retailing historical myths and collective

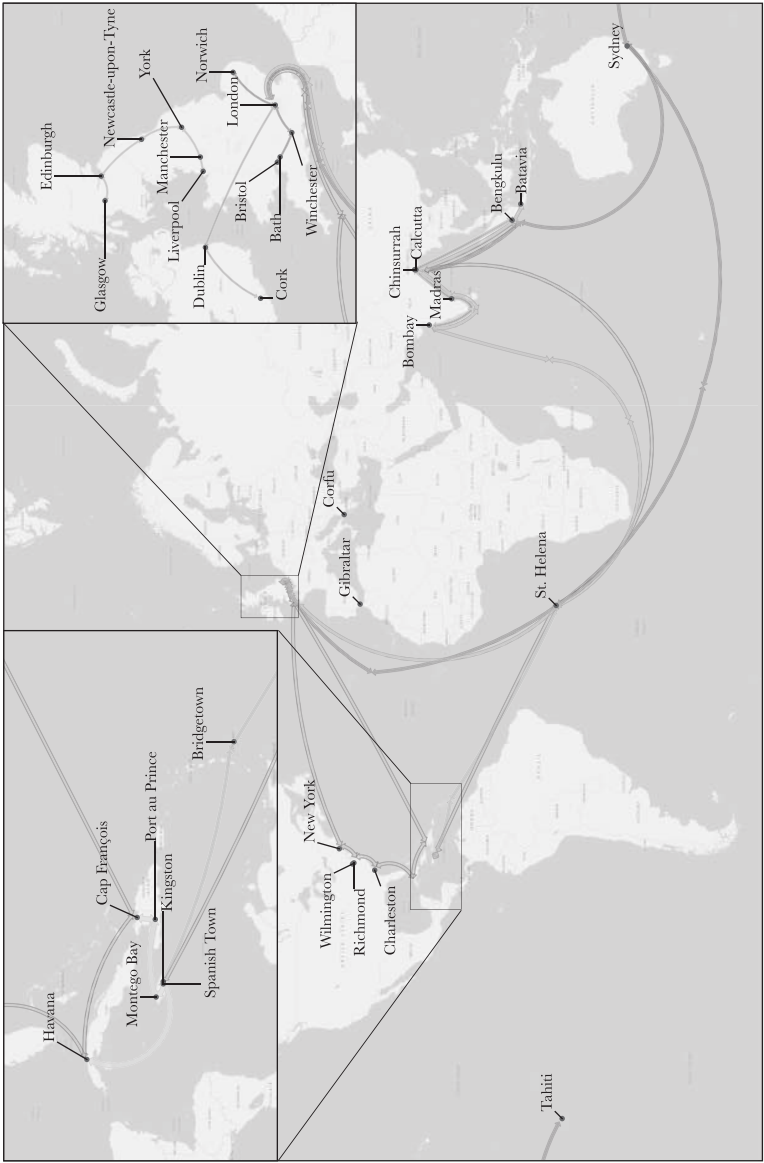
³ Gillian Russell, *The Theatres of War: Performance, Politics and Society, 1793–1815* (Oxford, 1995), 125, 129.

⁴ To be clear: I am not claiming theatrical performance to be a specifically “British” predilection; that is a claim of the eighteenth-century British. For the theater in the French imperial provinces, see, for example, David W. Powers, *From Plantation to Paradise? Cultural Politics and Musical Theatre in the French Colonies, 1764–1789* (East Lansing, MI, 2014).

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Map I.1 Performance sites of English drama, 1656–1833. Map by Fernando Amador



Map I.2 Routes of English drama, 1656–1833. Map by Fernando Amador

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fantasies, including the helpful if fictive notion of a “national character” itself, theater was the ultimate emblem of English cultural and racial capital in an age of sail, seizing the imaginations and animating the actions of British subjects and their others ceaselessly traversing the globe.

The political importance of theater in all of its registers has been the focus of some of the most exciting recent scholarship on the eighteenth century, which in turn has left in no doubt the recognition of the Georgian stage as the premier cultural institution of the age.⁵ The colonial dimensions of eighteenth-century theatrical culture, the theatrical dimensions of colonial culture and the role of performance in the protocols of both have also begun to receive serious attention.⁶ Part of the wide-ranging

⁵ Some of the most prominent, and important to this study, include Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660–1769* (Oxford, 1992); Greg Denning, *Mr. Bligh’s Bad Language: Passion, Power and Theatre on the Bounty* (Cambridge, 1992); Greg Denning, *Performances* (Chicago, IL, 1996); Paula R. Backscheider, *Spectacular Politics: Theatrical Power and Mass Culture in Early Modern England* (Baltimore, MD, 1993); Gillian Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre in Georgian London* (Cambridge, 2007); Russell, *Theatres of War*; Kathleen Wilson, “The Good, the Bad and the Impotent: Empire and the Politics of Identity in Georgian England,” in Ann Bermingham and John Brewer, eds., *The Consumption of Culture 1600–1800: Image, Object, Text* (Oxford, 1995), 237–62; Roach, *Cities of the Dead*; Lisa A. Freeman, *Character’s Theater: Genre and Identity on the Eighteenth-Century English Stage* (Philadelphia, PA, 2002); Mita Choudhury, *Interculturalism and Resistance in the London Theater, 1660–1800: Identity, Performance, Empire* (Lewisburg, PA, 2000); Julie Stone Peters, *Theatre of the Book, 1480–1880: Print, Text, and Performance in Europe* (Oxford, 2000); Peter Hulme and William H. Sherman, eds., “*The Tempest*” and *Its Travels* (London, 2000); Bridget Orr, *Empire on the English Stage, 1660–1714* (Cambridge, 2001); Helen M. Burke, *Riotous Performances: The Struggle for Hegemony in the Irish Theatre, 1712–1784* (Notre Dame, IN, 2003); Felicity Nussbaum, *The Limits of the Human: Fictions of Anomaly, Race and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2003); Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 2003); Felicity Nussbaum, “The Theatre of Empire: Racial Counterfeit, Racial Realism,” in Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840* (Cambridge, 2004), 71–90; John O’Brien, *Harlequin Britain: Pantomime and Entertainment, 1690–1760* (Baltimore, MD, 2004); Daniel O’Quinn, *Staging Governance: Theatrical Imperialism in London, 1770–1800* (Baltimore, MD, 2005); Odai Johnson, *Absence and Memory in Colonial American Theatre: Fiorelli’s Plaster* (New York, 2006); Jason Shaffer, *Performing Patriotism: National Identity in the Colonial and Revolutionary American Theater* (Philadelphia, PA, 2007); Douglas S. Harvey, *The Theatre of Empire: Frontier Performances in America 1750–1860* (London, 2010); Felicity Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater* (Philadelphia, PA, 2010); Michael Ragussis, *Theatrical Nation: Jews and Other Outlandish Englishmen in Georgian Britain* (Philadelphia, PA, 2010); Michael Dobson, *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance: A Cultural History* (Cambridge, 2011); Jenna M. Gibbs, *Performing the Temple of Liberty: Slavery, Theater and Popular Culture in London and Philadelphia, 1760–1850* (Baltimore, MD, 2014); Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649–1849* (Durham, NC, 2014).

⁶ Russell, *Theatres of War*; O’Quinn, *Staging Governance*; Choudhury, *Interculturalism and Resistance*; and Wilson, “The Good, the Bad and the Impotent” represent the earliest explorations of this topic.

media, and remarkable intermediality,⁷ of eighteenth-century urban culture, and encompassing both print culture and the performance spaces of streets, fairs, taverns, clubs and assembly rooms, English theater and its performance traditions were forged not only within the British archipelago but also across the networks of empire. The effects of this convergence were profoundly political, in ways big and small, affecting the decisions and practices of the colonized or subordinated as well as the colonizers. Men and women of various ethnicities, classes and legal statuses produced and performed English theater in the world and thus became crucial players in the constitution, at multiple registers, of categories of difference that were central to eighteenth-century Britons' own sense of distinctiveness and modernity, proving the ability of *English* theater to deliver the world.

Audiences' deep and enduring enthusiasm for "the play," the professionalization of itinerant acting companies and the vitality of amateur theatricals in the furthest reaches of the empire bore witness to the relevance theater was believed to have to the lives, identities and patriotism of British people wherever they lived. As such, this study seeks to reclaim the term "strollers" from its pejorative associations. Legislation attempting to regulate the stage had long identified itinerant players with "rogues, vagabonds, sturdy beggars and vagrants," and suspicions of players' social, political and sexual standing paradoxically continued through the century, even as the status of London and provincial actors was rising.⁸ The term "stroller" thus denoted the threatening status and mobility of actors – a set of "masterless" men and women whose lack of fixed abode and restless journeys across national and imperial boundaries challenged the verities of hierarchy and stability cherished by many propertied English people wherever they lived.⁹ But here I use the term, along with the eighteenth-century denizens it was meant to target, as a positive and dynamic signifier for all those who wandered the empire, by will or by force, and who in crossing oceans and territories sought escape, rescue, survival, salvation or fortune. The strolling players identified in this study

⁷ "Intermediality," or the interrelationship of media, is a term borrowed from communication studies. I follow the usage of Maureen N. McLane in *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge, 2011).

⁸ An Act for Reducing the Laws Relating to Rogues, Vagabonds, Sturdy Beggars, and Vagrants, into One Act of Parliament, 1714, 12 & 13 Anne c. 23. See Kristina Straub, *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology* (Princeton, NJ, 1992); John Brewer, *Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1997). For the continuing political impact of anti-theatricality in the eighteenth century, see Lisa Freeman, *Anti-theatricality and the Body Politic* (Philadelphia, PA, 2017).

⁹ Julia Swindells, "The Political Context of the 1737 Licensing Act," in Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737–1832* (Oxford, 2014) (hereafter *OHGT*), 110, quoting 12 Anne, stat. 2, c. 23.

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thereby became, however unwittingly or unwillingly, constitutive and emblematic of a transimperial and transnational modernity that was the substance of Britain's claim as a global power. At the forefront of several patterns in eighteenth-century globalization, the strolling players of empire were true cosmopolitans who tagged foreign lands as their own as they incarnated the much-admired "British" propensities for courage, inventiveness, enterprise and resistance (Figure I.1). As such, they were crucial to the success of wider patterns of colonization and the civilizing project.

The strolling players of the long eighteenth century were comprised not just of the itinerant theater companies wandering the Atlantic world but also of settlers, convicts, enslaved peoples, East India Company (EIC) officers, traders and other adventurers, distributed across eastern and western oceans, who trod the boards of a world stage to bring the beauties

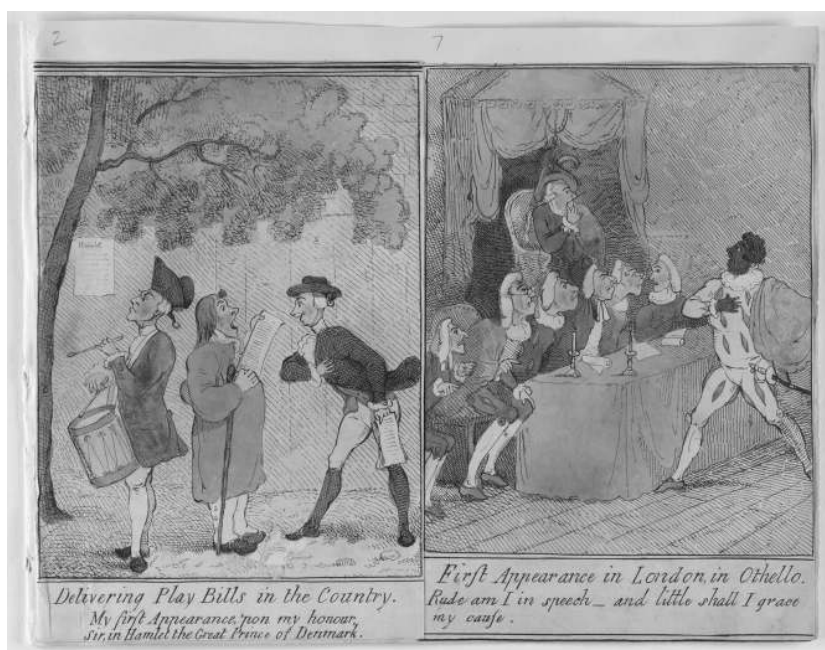


Figure I.1 Strolling player drumming up custom and playing Othello, 1793. Courtesy Yale Center for British Art (hereafter YCBA). From *Progress of a Player* (London, W. Holland, 1793). A black and white version of this figure will appear in some formats. For the color version, please refer to the plate section.