

ILLEGITIMATE THEATRE
IN LONDON, 1770–1840

JANE MOODY



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CHAPTER ONE

The invention of illegitimate culture

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, a fundamental cultural transformation took place in the nature of London theatre. At the heart of that transformation was the emergence of an illegitimate theatrical culture. We shall trace the varied origins of illegitimacy, in the unlicensed theatrical sphere of eighteenth-century London, amidst contemporary discourses of generic monstrosity and amongst the burlesque productions of Henry Fielding and Samuel Foote at the Haymarket Theatre. We then explore the emergence and institutional position of London's minor playhouses, including the Surrey, Coburg, Adelphi and Olympic Theatres. The fall of the Bastille, and England's war against Napoleon, provided the iconographic catalyst for the rise of an illegitimate drama. This theatre of physical peril, visual spectacle and ideological confrontation challenged both the generic premises and the cultural dominance of legitimate drama. In the theatrical revolution which followed, the minor playhouses and illegitimate genres would become the dramatic pioneers of the modern cultural metropolis.

'MONSTROUS MEDLIES': GENRE AND THEATRICAL REGULATION

The original patents granted by Charles II in 1662 to Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant permitted the performance of 'tragedies, comedies, plays, operas, music, scenes and all other entertainments of the stage'.¹ The King's gift of patents to his loyal courtier playwrights, together with permission to build 'two houses or theatres with all convenient rooms and other necessaries thereunto appertaining'² would transform the transient, portable companies of Elizabethan and Jacobean London into permanent London theatrical institutions, later

¹ Killigrew's patent, 25 April 1662, now in the possession of the Theatre Museum, London.

² Warrant granted by Charles II to Killigrew and Davenant, 21 August 1660. The warrant is conveniently reprinted in the excellent collection of documents edited by David Thomas in *Restoration and Georgian England, 1660–1788* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 9–10.

identified with Drury Lane (1663) and Covent Garden (1732). At the same time, Charles II's patents inaugurated a system of dramatic classification based (somewhat haphazardly) on theatrical genres. That system equivocated between literary specificity (tragedies and comedies), and generic inclusiveness (other, by implication, non-literary entertainments of the stage). Having successfully circumvented the ban on playing during the Commonwealth by categorising his plays as 'operas' Davenant may have influenced this portmanteau definition of theatrical kinds, for this classification both assumed and simultaneously dissolved the hierarchy of theatrical genres.

The patents bestowed by Charles II were a masterpiece of sophistry and ideological obfuscation. They introduced a system of monarchical patronage and cultural monopoly – as well as providing for the transfer of female roles from actors to actresses – as an institutional antidote to the theatre's profanity, obscenity and scurrility. As if by alchemy, the theatre's moral pollution ('diverse companies of players' acting without authority, representing plays which 'do contain much matter of profanation and scurrility', and thus tending 'to the debauching' of their audiences' morality) was to be transformed, through the agency of the patentees, into 'innocent and harmless divertissement' featuring 'useful and instructive representations of human life'.³ Yet, having been granted a commercial monopoly in perpetuity, the heirs and assigns of Killigrew and Davenant would inherit a weighty burden of moral and cultural stewardship which would remain inextricably associated with the monarchy's restoration.

Profanation and scurrility, glimpsed in the moral volatility of theatre which the bestowal of patents claimed to exorcise, are of course rarely far from view in theatrical history. In any case, by the end of the eighteenth century pamphleteers and radical journalists had vigorously challenged any remaining sanguinity about the beneficial, let alone the purgative, role of the patent theatres. Indeed, according to many commentators, the spectacular drama being promoted at the patent theatres simply promoted vulgarity, coarseness and cultural defilement.

Despite the theatrical monopoly, various dramatic competitors (first stubborn George Jolly, then the rebellious Thomas Betterton, who acquired a licence from the Lord Chamberlain in 1694/5)⁴ continued to vex the patentees. Several unlicensed theatres also opened their doors.

³ Quotations are from the 1660 warrant cited in note 2, with the exception of the last, which is from Killigrew's patent of 1662.

⁴ See Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of English Drama 1660–1900*, 6 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1952–9), 1: 308–16; 331–6.

Some, like Goodman's Fields (1729) in Ayliffe Street, appeared on the cultural and geographic fringes of London; others, such as Thomas Potter's Little Theatre in the Haymarket (1720), were located in the city's cultural centre. And although historians have often interpreted the production of Fielding's political satires at the Haymarket as the theatrical catalyst for Walpole's introduction of the controversial Licensing Act, that legislation is in fact inextricable from a concerted campaign to suppress the unlicensed theatres.

Meanwhile, the introduction at Drury Lane and Covent Garden of immigrant cultural forms such as pantomime and Italian opera had produced a flood of visual, textual and theatrical critiques.⁵ In particular, critics mocked the miscellaneous interweaving of music and visual spectacle with elaborate stage machinery, virtuosic dance and, in the case of pantomime, the silent, gestural language of mime. To some extent, this pervasive antipathy about opera and pantomime is a cultural sign of Britain's resurgent national self-consciousness: 'Rule Britannia', for example, was first performed in 1740. But what concerns me here is the decisive emergence of an absolute opposition between authentic and spurious theatrical forms, an opposition which soon begins to be imagined as a nightmarish confrontation between quasi-ethereal textuality and grotesque corporeality.

In periodicals such as the *Tatler* and the *Prompter*, or amidst the apocalyptic Dulness of Pope's *Dunciad*, writers and graphic satirists identified 'monstrous' theatrical kinds – namely pantomime, opera, puppet shows and farce – as the definitive sources of cultural pollution in the English theatre. In the *Dunciad*, for example, John Rich, the celebrated Harlequin and manager of Covent Garden, sits calmly 'mid snows of paper, and fierce hail of pease'. Drama at the patent theatres has been abandoned in favour of the spectacular attractions of sable sorcerers and ten-horned fiends, storms, whirlwinds and conflagrations. Writers and graphic satirists blamed these monstrous productions for what they perceived as a process of generic miscegenation (farce and epic 'get a jumbled race'; the arrival of *castrati* on the English stage becomes in these critiques a physical symbol of opera's effeminacy and sexual transgression) and for the disintegration of generic and social hierarchies

⁵ See *inter alia* 'Punch Kicking Apollo', (CPPS no. 1832), published 1729; Hogarth, 'A Just View of the English Stage, or Three Heads are Better than None' (CPPS no. 1761), published 1725; [James Miller], *Harlequin-Horace: or the art of modern poetry* (CPPS no. 1835), published 1729; John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera* (Lincoln's Inn Fields, January 1728) and Henry Fielding's theatrical satires, *Tumble-Down Dick; or, Phaeton in the Suds* (Haymarket, April 1836) and *Eurydice Hiss'd* (Drury Lane, February 1737).

(farce, ‘once the taste of Mobs, but now of Lords’).⁶ Careless of the generic licence which the terms of patent monopoly seem to have permitted, this critique of monstrosity now demanded an absolute and inviolable distinction between a text-based canon of English drama (defined by Richard Steele as ‘Shakespeare’s Heroes, and Jonson’s Humourists’) and a miscellaneous realm of non-textual, physical entertainment allegedly imported from Bartholomew Fair (‘Ladder-dancers, Rope-dancers, Juglers, and Mountebanks’).⁷

Such theatrical critiques shared a recurring, often scatological nightmare of institutional miscegenation whereby kings, authors and dramatic language would be suddenly cast aside in favour of a physical theatre defined in terms of frenetic movement, the tyranny of spectacular objects and the wizardry of quacks, freaks and charlatans.⁸ In the metatheatrical frontispiece to *Harlequin Horace*, for example, Harlequin raises his wooden sword to beat a distressed yet effulgent Apollo while Punch adds a vigorous kick of his own; on the stage floor lie the discarded works of Shakespeare, Jonson and Rowe. Indeed, this image of Britain’s leading dramatists being thrown away like so much cultural rubble soon becomes a favourite visual trope in Georgian graphic satire. A few decades later, the actor-manager David Garrick dramatised Harlequin’s attack on British drama – a national *œuvre* characteristically represented by Shakespeare – as a full-scale invasion in flat-bottomed boats. But at the end of *Harlequin’s Invasion* (Drury Lane, 1759), in a striking dramatic image of the stage’s capacity to reform itself, that usurpation was defeated in a spectacular *coup d’état*: Harlequin sank through the trap door, and Shakespeare rose up in triumph.⁹

The prominence of beleaguered texts and authors in these satirical images and narratives figured contemporary anxieties about the disintegration of the nation’s dramatic corpus into nonsense and corporeal buffoonery. In the *Prompter*, Aaron Hill offered his readers a disturbing and evocative prophecy of cultural decadence. Should these monstrous theatrical forms triumph, he argued, actors would be transformed into

⁶ *Dunciad* Bk 3, lines 257–8; Bk 1, line 68; *Imitations of Horace*, Epistle II.i line 311 in *The Poems of Alexander Pope* ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1965).

⁷ *The Tatler*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon 1987), 7 May 1709, I: 107.

⁸ The catalogue of Queen Ignorance’s hostages, as introduced by Harlequin, in Fielding’s *Pasquin* is a good example. This arbitrary collection of dramatic personages – ‘a tall man, and a tall woman, hired at a vast price’, ‘two human cats’ and a ‘set of rope-dancers and tumblers from Sadler’s-wells’ – is designed to highlight the disintegration of knowledge and dramatic culture at the patent houses. See *Works of Henry Fielding*, 14 vols (London: J. Johnson, 1808) v: v.i.341.

⁹ Given Garrick’s dependence on the profits of pantomime during his management of Drury Lane, Shakespeare’s triumph in *Harlequin’s Invasion* is a little disingenuous.

‘tame vocal puppets’.¹⁰ As puppets, performers would become no more than lifeless signifiers of human beings, devoid of individual identity, and capable of language only through the intermediary presence of their puppeteer. Hill’s image is worth remembering when we come to consider *The Handsome Housemaid* (Haymarket, 1773), Samuel Foote’s lively, satirical puppet play. This is because Foote’s dramatic satire unwittingly inverts Hill’s ideological terms, presenting the Haymarket puppets as the desiccated, wooden embodiment of patent theatrical culture. From the controversial vantage-point of mid-eighteenth-century pantomime, we can also look forward to Joseph Grimaldi’s transformation of the Clown into the whimsical, practical satirist of the Regency city. For writers such as Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt, Grimaldi’s sensuous, ingenious, parti-coloured Clown became a precious symbol of social licence; Harlequin’s episodic violence, meanwhile, suggested the pleasures of a delicious political retribution.

LICENSING THE UNLICENSED

Opposition to the Goodman’s Fields theatre, which had opened in 1720 with neither patent nor licence, was conducted in a familiar discourse alleging the dangers of economic and moral pollution. Erecting the theatre, warned a Justices’ order, ‘will draw away Tradesmens Servants and others from their lawful Callings, and corrupt their Manners, and also occasion great Numbers of loose, idle, and disorderly Persons’.¹¹ Commentators in this period invariably recognised the neighbourhoods surrounding Drury Lane and Covent Garden as part of a regrettable but licensed topography of pleasure. By contrast, opposition to unlicensed theatres beyond Westminster persistently cited the supposed danger to the economic health of manufacturing neighbourhoods (in the case of Goodman’s Fields, the manufacture of silk and wool)¹² and especially to their lower-class inhabitants.

After several inconclusive attempts to silence performances at Goodman’s Fields, as well as the threat of a new unlicensed theatre in St Martin’s le Grand, Sir John Barnard proposed a Bill ‘to restrain the Number and scandalous Abuses of the Play-Houses’. Notwithstanding

¹⁰ Aaron Hill and William Popple, *The Prompter: A Theatrical Paper*, selected and edited by William W. Appleton and Kalman A. Burnim (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1966), 30 January 1735, 150.

¹¹ Arthur Bedford, *The Evil and Mischief of Stage-Playing . . . occasioned by the erecting of a Play-house in the Neighbourhood*, 2nd edition (London, J. Wilford, 1735), 40.

¹² See the petition submitted by the Lord Mayor and city aldermen, 1729–30, PRO LC 7/3, fol. 28.

the terms of the patent, he argued, 'diverse ill-disposed and disorderly Persons, have of late taken upon themselves, without any legal authority, to act and represent Tragedies, Comedies, Plays, Operas, and other Entertainments of the Stage'. The Bill's aim was the suppression of unlicensed theatres in London by means of a revival of vagrancy legislation: those performing without authority would be classified and punished as 'rogues, vagabonds and sturdy beggars'. But Barnard's legislation failed when Walpole met stern opposition over his attempt to graft on to the suppression of unlicensed theatres measures which would have expanded the Lord Chamberlain's powers to control the licensing of plays.¹³

Apart from a petition submitted by 'several eminent Merchants, Shopkeepers, Silk-Men, Weavers, Packers, Dyers, Factors, and other Tradesmen and Inhabitants of the City of London', little support had been forthcoming for Goodman's Fields. In the *Prompter*, however, Hill questioned the expediency of closing unlicensed theatres, and ironically recommended the reversal of existing institutional hierarchies. The unlicensed theatres should be permitted to perform tragedy and comedy alone, he suggested, while the patent and licensed establishments would be restricted to the profitable theatrical kinds ('farce, Harlequinery, buffoonery, . . . dancing, singing, dumb or deserving-to-be dumb entertainment').¹⁴ Hill's ironic solution to the problem of reconciling dramatic legitimacy and patent profit rehearses questions of genre and cultural stewardship which would preoccupy critics, managers and pamphleteers for many years to come.

During the 1730s, political and partisan dramas of various kinds were being performed at London theatres. So, as Robert Hume has pointed out, the argument that Henry Fielding's vituperative anti-Walpole satires were solely responsible for the hurried passing of the Licensing Act cannot be sustained. But what Hume's thesis perhaps underplays is the pivotal position of the Haymarket as an unlicensed institution. For the Haymarket's repertoire, featuring lively burlesques and topical satires, already represented a powerful form of *cultural* opposition to Rich's Covent Garden and Fleetwood's Drury Lane. In particular, *The Historical Register for the Year 1736* and *Eurydice Hiss'd*, both performed at the Haymarket in 1737, audaciously dramatise the systemic relationships between political corruption and patent theatrical practice.

¹³ See Vincent J. Liesenfeld, *The Licensing Act of 1737* (Madison, University of Wisconsin, 1984) 52–9; Robert D. Hume, *Henry Fielding and the London Theatre: 1728–1737* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 197–9. ¹⁴ *Prompter*, 63.

In these plays, Fielding represents what the character of Medley calls a 'strict resemblance between the states political and theatrical' (*Historical Register*, II. ii. 38). Here, theatrical managers resemble lawless prime ministers, prime ministers resemble Harlequins, and both actors and politicians are bought at exorbitant prices. The unlicensed status of the Haymarket Theatre enables Fielding to create an unprecedented indictment of the institutional collusion which characterised government, state institutions and patent theatrical management at Drury Lane and Covent Garden.¹⁵ In the final scene of *Tumble-Down Dick*, a cartload of performers from an unlicensed theatre are about to be committed to prison under the vagrancy legislation of 1713. But when the Justice is offered a financial inducement to waive this punishment, he suddenly decides to become a performer himself, and is promptly transformed into Harlequin.¹⁶ In this way, Fielding's self-reflexive satire on legal corruption reminds his audience of the Haymarket's precarious position beyond the law. That position, as Fielding no doubt realised, was too precarious to last.

Like Sir John Barnard's Bill, the Licensing Act (10 Geo. II, c. 28) revived the classification of actors as vagrants (see 12 Anne II, c. 23); not until 1843 did performers begin to be distinguished in law from vagrants. Any individual performing an 'Interlude, Tragedy, Comedy, Opera, Play, farce or other entertainment of the Stage' not previously sanctioned by letters patent or licensed by the Lord Chamberlain 'for hire, gain or reward' would now be liable to punishment as a rogue and a vagabond.¹⁷ Unlike the earlier Bill, however, the Licensing Act also succeeded in imposing a system of textual censorship by which the play texts for Drury Lane and Covent Garden – and later, as we shall see, other minor theatres within Westminster such as the Adelphi and the Olympic – had to be scrutinised before performance by the Lord Chamberlain.¹⁸ But by restricting the king's power to grant letters patent for the erection of theatres in London to Westminster and its liberties, the Licensing Act indirectly contributed to the emergence of an uncensored theatrical terrain beyond the control of the Lord Chamberlain. The Haymarket's unique institutional position, on the border between the patent theatres and the unlicensed playhouses, is one interesting

¹⁵ *Works of Fielding*, v. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁷ See Thomas, *Restoration and Georgian England*, 207–10. My account is indebted to the detailed studies by Liesenfeld, *Licensing Act of 1737*, and Hume, *Henry Fielding*.

¹⁸ On theatre censorship in this period, see Leonard Conolly, *The Censorship of English Drama 1737–1824* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1976).

consequence of this legislation. But my discussion here concentrates on the unwitting creation of an illegitimate domain within metropolitan theatre – a domain which would evoke the spectre of political radicalism, the promotion of plebeian immorality and the uncontrollable reproduction of urban criminality.

The Act initially achieved its aim of suppressing the unlicensed theatres as well as ending altogether Fielding's career as playwright and theatrical manager. In 1740, however, Henry Giffard reopened Goodman's Fields, cleverly avoiding the provisions of the Licensing Act (notably the clause about performing 'for hire, gain or reward') by charging spectators to listen to music, and then offering *gratis* comedies such as George Farquhar's *The Beaux' Stratagem*. But the much-publicised engagement of the celebrated actor David Garrick, who performed *Richard III* in 1741, incurred the wrath of the patentees and Giffard was forced to close the theatre. Cibber's production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Haymarket similarly provoked a sharp rebuke from the Lord Chamberlain.¹⁹ Despite these threats and prosecutions, however, the minor theatres would continue to defy the patentees throughout this period by staging performances of Shakespeare (see chapter 4).

After Goodman's Fields, the Little Theatre in the Haymarket and Lincoln's Inn Fields had been silenced, complaints soon began to recur about disorderliness at establishments such as Sadler's Wells (which had been staging rope-dancing, acrobatics, music and singing since 1740), and a theatre in Well's yard. In order to oversee more closely such 'public entertainments', Parliament introduced an Act in 1752 'for the better preventing thefts and robberies, and for regulating places of public entertainment, and punishing persons keeping disorderly houses'.²⁰ This legislation represented unlicensed playhouses as places of plebeian immorality (where 'the lower sort of People' were spending money in 'riotous Pleasures') as well as a serious threat to property and social order. The Act therefore established a system of annual licences for 'music, dancing, and other entertainments of the like kind' which would be administered by local magistrates. By contrast with Barnard's Bill and the Licensing Act, both of which implicitly defined theatres as special and potentially subversive cultural institutions, these later Acts simply regulated unlicensed playhouses as part of an undifferentiated realm of 'public entertainment'.

This legislation unwittingly established an enduring division in the

¹⁹ PRO LC 5/161, 192.

²⁰ 25 Geo. II, c. xxxvi; see also 28 Geo. II, c. xix.

regulation of London theatre. The Act of 1752 was based on the assumption that the public entertainments offered at Sadler's Wells and other unlicensed theatres within a 15-mile radius of Westminster represented a non-dramatic sphere of bodily performance utterly distinct from the drama staged at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. No provision was made for the textual scrutiny of these entertainments, for what preoccupied legislators was not the threat of political subversion but rather the moral and social pollution spilling out from plebeian pleasure. In any case, how could a system of censorship be imposed on performances for which no texts existed? But from within this portmanteau category of public entertainments, illegitimate theatre would begin to evolve.

As if Fielding's burlesques had permeated the building's very fabric, the 1760s and 1770s revealed the irrepressible character of the Haymarket. In the last decades of the century, the playhouse seemed to relish its own status as an historical place of political and cultural opposition. After a riding accident witnessed by the Duke of York, in which Samuel Foote had lost a leg, the actor and dramatist succeeded in acquiring – by way of theatrical compensation – a summer patent for the representation of 'tragedies, plays, operas and other performances on the stage' at the Haymarket. In one of those tricks of patronage which so often shape stage history, the unlicensed Haymarket now became the playhouse on the institutional border between the monopolists (Drury Lane and Covent Garden) and the minor establishments, a position the theatre would exploit in a variety of ways for the next fifty years.

Samuel Foote (the English Aristophanes, as he was often described) and his successor, George Colman the Elder, inherited an institution whose cultural position and generic traditions had been defined and shaped by Henry Fielding. In his burlesque prelude *The Election of the Managers* (1784), for example, Colman followed Fielding's lead in his daring fusion of a political election and a rehearsal play.²¹ In this occasional piece, written for the opening of the Haymarket season, and full of allusions to Britain's war against America, Colman transformed into theatre managers the parliamentary candidates who had taken part in the controversial recent election for the City of Westminster. Indeed, the election hustings had taken place only a stone's throw from the Haymarket, under the portico of St Paul's in Covent Garden. In *The Election* the government candidates, Lord Hood and Sir Cecil Gray, become Laurel and Ivy, the colluding and corrupt managers of Covent

²¹ Larpent MS 659.

Garden and Drury Lane, fighting under the slogans ‘Prerogatives of Tragedy’ and ‘Privileges of Comedy’. Charles James Fox, leader of the Rockingham Whigs, appears as Bayes, the patriotic proprietor of ‘old English humour’ at the Haymarket who vociferously opposes the ‘Puppet Shew Managers’ at the patent houses. Georgiana, the Duchess of Devonshire, also features in Colman’s prelude as Mrs Buckram, the tailor’s irrepressible wife, who insists that women are ‘the most active and able Canvassers’ at an election and expresses her staunch conviction that women should be allowed to become Members of Parliament.²²

The Examiner of Plays made sporadic deletions to the licensing manuscript of *The Election*. John Larpent erased references to Laurel and Ivy which portrayed these ‘two Consuls’ presiding over the ‘literary Republick’. But elsewhere in the play Larpent ignored a series of references to Laurel’s and Ivy’s imperialist ambitions (see Blarney’s speech to the electors describing them as ‘Managers of Great Britain and Ireland’) and repeated allusions to various kinds of political and theatrical corruption (according to Type, a reviewer, ‘The State & the Theatre are equally at our devotion. Managers and Ministers, all know that no piece & no measure can possibly go down without our assistance’). Notwithstanding its patriotic claptraps and hackneyed appeals, Colman’s prelude presented the Haymarket as a place of heroic, patriotic opposition to the insidious, corrupt alliance of the patent theatres.²³ In this sense, *The Election of the Managers* laughingly anticipates that later, radical critique of the collusive relationships between the political and the theatrical states mounted by critics such as John Thelwall and William Hazlitt.

The Haymarket manager was required to await the closure of Drury Lane and Covent Garden Theatres before opening for his own summer season. In the winter of 1772–3, infuriated by Garrick’s nonchalant, tactical extension of his season at Drury Lane (this strategy of encroachment became a favoured, though unsuccessful, tactic by which to erode the Haymarket’s receipts), Samuel Foote decided to evade the terms of his patent. To perform tragedy or comedy, as Foote well knew, would certainly have incurred the threat of prosecution. Instead, Foote created an illegitimate dramatic entertainment – *The Handsome Housemaid; or, Piety in Pattens* – whose avoidance of dramatic dialogue and eschewal of human performers was calculated to escape legal definition as drama.

²² For the Duchess of Devonshire’s participation and the role of gender in this election, see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (Yale University Press, 1992), 242ff.

²³ These tactics were somewhat disingenuous for, as the play comically acknowledged, Colman’s own managerial career had been closely connected with Covent Garden.

Thus far, Foote's production might be seen as an extension of those unlicensed ruses which had included his own 'Dish of Tea' performances in which drama had been performed *gratis*, with a charge made for the spectators' refreshment. But the 'Primitive Puppet Show' exceeded mere formal subterfuge. Once a sign of cultural vulgarity, the puppets exhibited by Charlotte Charke and others had recently become a modish form of metropolitan entertainment, patronised by leading writers and public figures such as Samuel Johnson.²⁴ The semiotic medium of a puppet show, filtered through a parody of Richardson's *Pamela*, offered Foote not only a kind of legal equivocation, but also a form of mimicry which literally embodied its own critique.²⁵

In the show, the handsome housemaid Polly Pattens heroically rejects the seductive overtures of both the Squire (who promises to take her off to London where she will have 'a round of delights') and the Butler. But this narrative of triumphant virtue, in which Polly proves 'how truly delicate a House Maid can be' is no more than a flimsy pretext. What the puppet show effectively provides is a cultural form through which to mock the 'woodenness' of performance and sentiment at the patent theatres. For his spectators, of course, jokes about wood and woodenness (the Squire refers to the Butler as 'a wooden headed rascal' to which Polly indignantly replies that he is 'made of the same Flesh & Blood as myself') had an immediate and comic visual corollary in Foote's own wooden leg. Foote's cleverness, however, was to present woodenness as a form of satirical iconography. In *The Handsome Housemaid*, therefore, the wooden body, awkward movement and ventriloquised speech of the puppets provide a visual and physical analogy for the hollowness of language, gesture and emotion which characterise theatrical productions at Drury Lane and Covent Garden. In particular, as the *St James's Chronicle* recognised, the Primitive Puppet Show burlesqued 'those hackneyed and disjointed Sentiments which are become so fashionable of late' in English patent drama.²⁶

Foote's puppets embodied, literally and metaphorically, the insipidity of contemporary theatrical culture (a theme which would also preoccupy Hazlitt) as well as its slavish dependence on foreign performers and

²⁴ See Scott Cutler Shershow, *Puppets and 'Popular Culture'* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

²⁵ A manuscript of *Piety in Pattens* can be found in the Larpent collection, MS 467. A valuable modern edition now exists which includes an excellent essay on Foote and the revolt against sentimental drama as well as a useful commentary on the show's production and reception. See 'Samuel Foote's *Primitive Puppet-Show* featuring *Piety in Pattens: A Critical Edition*', ed. Samuel N. Bogorad and Robert Gale Noyes, *Theatre Survey* 14 no. 1a (Fall 1973).

²⁶ 13–16 February 1773.

plays. At Drury Lane and Covent Garden, Foote's prologue explains, 'we have frigid actors hewn out of petrified blocks; and a theatrical manager upon stilts made out of the mulberry tree'. This theatrical punning on the disembodied character of the puppets is brilliantly underlined by Foote's ironic framing of the Primitive Puppet Show in terms of a collapse of legal classifications. In an extension of the legal farce dramatised in his *Trial of Samuel Foote, The Handsome Housemaid* ends with the metatheatrical arrest of Foote and his puppets for vagrancy. Finally, however, all the performers are released, for the learned court is unable to decide whether Foote should be classified as man or puppet. (If he is committed as a man, the puppet part of him should have a right to action for damages, argues Quibble; if committed as a puppet, then the body might sue for false imprisonment.)²⁷ The Primitive Puppet Show's dissolution into legal quibbling thus highlights the performance's semiotic status as a dramatic equivocation. The puppets' woodenness is suddenly revealed to be doubly deceitful, the puppets themselves a delightful legal sham.

Sophisticated puffing and tantalising advance publicity had ensured that the Haymarket Theatre was packed to the rafters for the opening night of *Piety in Pattens*; according to the *General Evening Post* (16 February), MPs even deserted their debate in the House of Commons to come and watch Foote's puppets. But some of the Haymarket spectators were not impressed by Foote's satirical puppetry. In particular, spectators in the gallery objected vociferously to the absence of any physical combat in Foote's puppet show, and proceeded to express their frustration about this unwise omission by taking limited revenge on the fabric of the auditorium and breaking down the orchestra. The spectators' disruption thus offers an ironic postscript to the relationships between critique and convention in *The Handsome Housemaid*. In a revised and lengthened version, however, Foote's puppet play was regularly performed at the Haymarket until the mid-1790s.

Foote's appropriation of puppetry as a cultural practice which cannot be classified as *drama* marks a turning-point in the delineation of an illegitimate theatre. Before exploring the evolution of illegitimate genres, however, we need to take note of the first direct challenge to the Licensing Act. In some ways, the controversy over the Royalty Theatre in Wellclose Square rehearsed now familiar themes. A petition submitted by 'many of the most respectable and opulent Merchants,

²⁷ See the *Morning Chronicle* review, 16 February 1773.

Shipbuilders, Ropemakers, and other Gentlemen resident in the vicinity of the Tower²⁸ alleged for example that the theatre would increase dissipation, economic indiscipline and criminal activity in the neighbourhood. The patentees responded with litigious alacrity to the unlicensed performance of a Shakespeare play (*As You Like It*). And the Royalty's manager – the comic actor known as 'Plausible Jack' Palmer – discovered another strategy by which to negotiate the ban on playing 'for hire, gain or reward'.

So what distinguished the Royalty from earlier unlicensed ventures such as Goodman's Fields? For the first time since the Licensing Act, the manager of an unlicensed playhouse had announced his intention openly to defy the monopoly by representing legitimate drama. In defence of his illicit performances, Palmer invoked various legal justifications, notably the semi-autonomous legal status of the neighbourhood around the Tower of London in which the Royalty was situated.²⁹ But what made this defiance all the more galling to the patentees was Palmer's audacious proposal to stage Shakespeare, the quintessential dramatist of theatrical legitimacy, on the Royalty's opening night, to be followed by another play from the stock repertoire, Garrick's *Miss in her Teens*. When they discovered this plan, the patentees began their sabre-rattling. By publishing extracts from the Vagrant and Vagabond Acts, they signalled their intention to use the process of law to transform the players of Shakespeare into rogues and vagabonds.³⁰ Only mildly alarmed by these threats, the indefatigable Palmer decided to perform *As You Like It* for the benefit of the London Hospital.

Whereas the Goodman's Fields Theatre had sparked almost implacable opposition, opinion was now much more divided about the moral and cultural status of a popular theatre. When local magistrates declined to give Palmer a licence for the Royalty, they cited the recent royal proclamation about 'disorderly practices' as well as making the familiar argument that stage performances would be 'a nuisance peculiarly mischievous in that part of the metropolis'.³¹ This refusal, which may

²⁸ Memorial, passed from the Home Office to magistrates in Whitechapel, Shoreditch and Shadwell, opposing the renewal of the Royalty licence in 1798, HO 65/1, 22 January 1798, PRO.

²⁹ See letter from 'Boni Hominis Age' entitled 'Powerful Reasons against the Playhouse in Goodman's Fields' (1786), undated cutting, Tower Hamlets Public Library.

³⁰ Sheridan and Harris claimed (implausibly) to have spent £7,200 prosecuting their case against the theatre. See their MS letter, 14 February 1816, to the Secretary of State for the Home Department, LC 7/4.

³¹ Unidentified cuttings, Theatre Museum. On the proclamation and moral reform, see M. J. Roberts, 'The Society for the Suppression of Vice and its Early Critics', *Historical Journal* 26 (1983), 159–76.

have been influenced by pressure from the Lord Chamberlain,³² was followed by a series of decisions which seem to reveal the magistrates' conflicting loyalties. Having granted a licence in 1788, they declined to renew it in 1802, only to license the Royalty again in 1803. The pamphlet war surrounding the Royalty was similarly divided, accusatory and acrimonious. Several writers argued that a theatre would help to promote the circulation of money, as well as providing employment for hackney coachmen, porters and labourers; another claimed that drama helped to promote female virtue by depicting the evils perpetrated by the 'despoilers of private tranquillity', while another made the argument that the Royalty might counterbalance the insidious influence of those associations 'inimical to government', said to flourish in Spitalfields, Ratcliffe Highway and around Tower Hamlets. But the Royalty's opponents maintained that the beneficial effects of the nearby National and Sunday Schools would be utterly nullified if the theatre were to be granted a licence, and held out the prospect of 'our industrious mechanics' and 'sober apprentices' deserting their gunmaking orders to visit the Royalty. And it was but one short imaginative step from men abandoning their workshops to losing the war with France. At a time when 'a formidable enemy is at our gates, and threatens to howl destruction on our devoted country', the licensing of the Royalty was portrayed as an issue of national and patriotic concern.³³

Carriages and coaches swept up for the Royalty's first performance. But Plausible Jack's foray into unlicensed Shakespeare lasted only one night, because the patentees immediately commenced legal proceedings against both Palmer and the members of his company. Indeed, several Royalty performers were subsequently imprisoned by Justice Staples, only to be bailed by the magistrates of Tower Hamlets, whose ruling was then overturned on appeal to the King's Bench.³⁴ So when the Royalty

³² See Peter Pindar (pseudonym of George Daniel), *The Plotting Managers, a Poetical Satirical Interlude* (London: J. James, 1787).

³³ *A Letter . . . on the Statutes for the Regulation of Theatres, the Conduct of Mr. Palmer, of Mr. Justice Staples, and the Other Justices* [1787]; *A Review of the Present Contest . . .* (London: Charles Stalker, 1787); [George Colman], *A Very Plain State of the Case . . .* (London: J. Murray, 1787); [Isaac Jackman], *Royal and Royalty Theatres . . .* (London: J. Murray, 1787); Augustus Polydore (pseud.), *The Trial of Mr. John Palmer, Comedian . . . Tried in the Olympian Shades before the Right honourable Lord Chief-Justice Shakspear . . . John Milton, Joseph Addison, Thomas Otway . . .* (London: J. Ridgeway, 1787); *Case of the Renters of the Royalty Theatre* (n.d.); [John Palmer], *Case of the Theatre in Well Street* (1790); [An inhabitant of the Tower], *The Tendency of Dramatic Exhibitions* (?1794); Revd Thomas Thirlwall, *A Solemn Protest against the Revival of Scenic Exhibitions and Interludes at the Royalty Theatre . . .* (London: T. Plummer, 1803).

³⁴ See *Gentleman's Magazine*, March 1788, 50: 267; James Lawrence, *Dramatic Emancipation; or Strictures on the State of the Theatre . . . in the Pamphleteer*, 1813, 2: 382; unidentified cuttings, Tower Hamlets Library.

reopened two weeks later, the repertoire carefully avoided the litigious genres of tragedy and comedy.³⁵ Moreover, in the wake of Palmer's transgression, the patentees tried to impose a new and unprecedented definition of their own privileges. Sheridan and Harris now declared that their monopoly of dramatic forms also extended to a monopoly over the spoken word. They therefore threatened to prosecute Palmer if any of his performers should speak, even in a pantomimic performance. Indeed, the famous clown Carlos Delpini was actually prosecuted for having spoken the words 'roast beef' unaccompanied by music.³⁶ Whether or not these were the only words spoken by Delpini on stage, it seems a little ironic that roast beef, traditional food of John Bull, and by then inextricable from the defence of robust British political culture, should suddenly become associated with theatrical transgression. The corporeal semiotics of pantomime – all bodily excrescences and uncontrollable consumption – seemed to have passed with their own irrepressible energy into the newly monopolised world of dramatic speech.

Infuriated by Palmer's jaunty escapade at the Royalty, the patentees pursued the actor to his engagement at the Royal Circus in 1789. Here in St George's Fields, Charles Dibdin the Elder had attempted to realise his dream that horsemanship, if divested of blackguardism and 'made an object of public consequence', might form the basis for an entertainment which profitably combined the traditions of stage and circus. From the beginning, the Royal Circus managers had also announced their resolution to perform dramatic entertainments including 'speaking pantomime, opera, medleys, drolls and interludes'.³⁷ In the early years, however, the Circus' history had been stormy indeed: a catalogue of licences refused, pecuniary embarrassments and acrimonious disputes involving Charles Hughes, the dastardly manager of the horses. The engagement of Palmer, then conveniently living 'within the rules' of the King's Bench prison (i.e., as a debtor) therefore represented a determined attempt to prove the theatrical distinction of the Circus.

³⁵ The fate of the Royalty prompted Sadler's Wells, Astley's and the Royal Circus to seek Parliamentary protection for their entertainments. But by shrewdly invoking the spectre of popular vice and the need to protect patent property, Sheridan neatly filibustered the proposed Interlude Bill. See *Journal of the House of Commons*, 43: 299, 7 March 1788; *Gentleman's Magazine*, supplement for 1788, 1146.

³⁶ Lawrence, *Dramatic Emancipation*, 382; Edward Brayley, *Historical and Descriptive Accounts of the Theatres of London* (London: J. Taylor, 1826), 80. See also *The Memoirs of J. Decastro, Comedian*, ed. R. Humphreys (London: Sherwood, 1824), 123ff.

³⁷ LC 10–12 October 1782, cited in Robert Fahrner, *The Theatre Career of Charles Dibdin the Elder (1745–1814)* (New York, New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 96.

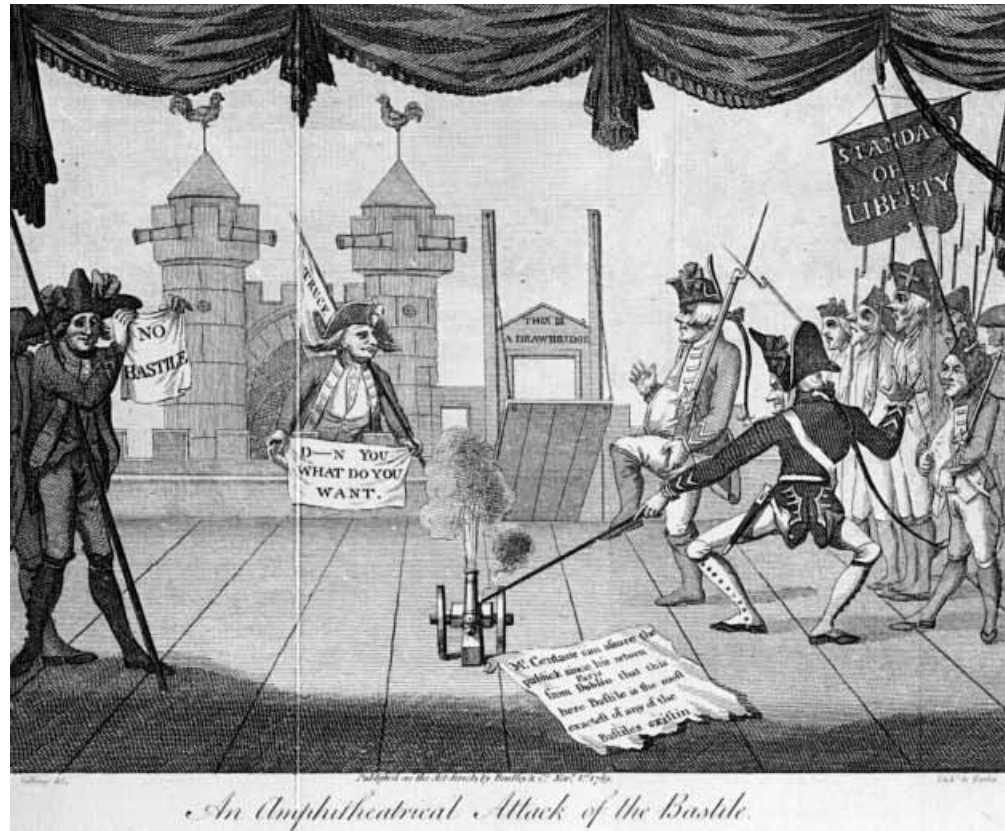
The Bastille's extraordinary run of more than seventy nights aroused 'the envy, dread, and opposition of the Theatres Royal'.³⁸ Whilst playing the hero, Henry du Bois, in John Dent's play, Palmer was prosecuted by the notorious Justice Hyde for 'speaking Prose on the Stage' and sent to the Surrey gaol as a rogue and vagrant.³⁹ Throughout this period, the patentees almost invariably selected for prosecution those minor productions which featured a well-known performer. They no doubt found sweet revenge, too, in having the dramatic hero of French liberation imprisoned in an English prison. But despite all these attempts at intimidation, the representation of revolution and of war had become a spectacular catalyst. The minor theatres now began to abandon the pretence of dramatic silence for the litigious controversies of dramatic speech.

John Dent's *Bastille* (Royal Circus, October 1789) is a sentimental comedy in illegitimate disguise.⁴⁰ In its semiotic conventions, the play appears to conform to the regulations governing the minor theatres: the text of *The Bastille* consists entirely of recitative, interspersed with songs; the play also incorporates topical descriptions of 'the dreadful sufferings' endured by the Bastille prisoners and the 'uncontrollable effervescence of popular heroism which led to the destruction of that horrid fortress'.⁴¹ In many ways, however, Dent's play closely follows the conventions of sentimental comedy: Henry, whose love for Matilda is opposed by her father, overcomes that characteristic barrier to romantic happiness by rescuing him from the Bastille. Love and revolution are then interwoven in a patriotic, allegorical transformation. At the end of the play, accompanied by 'low music', Britannia descends, seated in her triumphal car, bearing two transparent portraits of King George III and Queen Charlotte. According to Britannia, the fall of the Bastille represents the happy translation of British liberty across the Channel: 'From Britannia you caught the Patriot flame, / On Britain's plan then build your future fame / Let liberty and reason rule each part / And form the Magna Charta of the heart' (23). After Britannia's song, the statue of liberty joyfully tramples

³⁸ Address, John Dent, *The Bastille* (London: W. More, 1789); *Memoirs of Decastro*, ed. Humphreys, 124.

³⁹ *Memoirs of Decastro*, 125; Brayley, *Historical and Descriptive Accounts*, 71–2. According to Brayley, Palmer was released after Hyde extracted an assurance that the Circus season would be limited in future to the period between Easter and Michaelmas. Having settled his financial affairs, Palmer returned to Drury Lane and played Joseph Surface (a role Sheridan claimed to have designed especially for him) in *The School for Scandal*.⁴⁰ Dent, *The Bastille*.

⁴¹ Brayley, *Historical and Descriptive Accounts*, 71.



1. The illegitimate revolution begins. *An Amphitheatrical Attack of the Bastile.*

on the figure of despotism and then ascends to the sounds of a patriotic chorus. What is notable about *The Bastille* is John Dent's skilful marriage of illegitimate dramaturgy and the legitimate conventions of benevolence and sentimental reconciliation.

Collings' engraving, 'An Amphitheatrical Attack of the Bastile' (plate 1) is a metatheatrical satire on this illegitimate innovation. The image features a number of humorous scrolls (the hapless Bastille governor holds one which reads 'D--N YOU WHAT DO YOU WANT') and even the (paper-thin) drawbridge is ironically labelled as such. What is more, the supposed revolutionaries are a motley, hollow-eyed crew who look utterly incapable of even holding up their Standard of Liberty, let alone of storming the Bastille. On the stage floor, next to the exploding cannon, we can also see a scrap of paper whose text satirically punctures the proud verisimilitude of the Royal Circus's production. Indeed, the miniature announcement written here is almost like another scroll, left behind by accident. It reads: 'Mr. Centaur can assure the publick since his return from ~~Dublin~~ Paris that this here Bastile is the most exactest of any of the Bastiles existin.' But despite the mocking laughter engendered by this image, *The Bastille* had transformed for ever what could be represented on a minor stage.

The fall of the Bastille, and Britain's war against Napoleon, provided the minor theatres with a collection of topical, spectacular narratives perfectly suited to illegitimate representation. Beyond the control of the Examiner of Plays (who had banned Covent Garden's Bastille play),⁴² and forbidden to represent legitimate drama, Astley's, the Royal Circus and Sadler's Wells Theatre began to pioneer their own physical dramaturgy of war. In these shows military knowledge, technical innovation and topographical illusion went hand in hand: managers like the gruff, blunt Philip Astley (who had received four horses in gratitude for his gallantry at the siege of Valenciennes) shrewdly exploited his first-hand knowledge of military strategy and organisation. At the Amphitheatre, Astley created a series of elaborate equestrian spectacles such as *Paris in an Uproar* (August 1789), *The Champ de Mars* (July 1790) and *Bagshot-Heath Camp* (August 1792).⁴³ Meanwhile, the managers of Sadler's Wells

⁴² See Conolly, *Censorship*, 91–2.

⁴³ Astley's playbills often included detailed explanations of weaponry and battle formations. See for example the bill advertising *The Surrender of Condé* (Astley's, August 1793 in HTC) which promised its audience 'cannon of different calibres' and ammunition wagons, and even offered an explanation of a blockade including glacis, counterscape and ditch.

exploited the theatre's proximity to the New river in their production of an aquatic theatre of war featuring the ingenious reconstruction of sea battles including Charles Dibdin's *The Siege of Gibraltar* (1804).

Revolution and war now provided the script for an illegitimate theatre of peril, danger, and spectacular illusion. The physical materials as well as the iconography of these martial spectacles originated from contemporary warfare. Craftsmen from the Woolwich dockyard, for example, were making the model ships for the naval battles staged at Sadler's Wells; 'Redfire', a new substance manufactured for use as a military explosive from strontia, shellac and chlorate of potash, produced the spectacular flame effects to be seen at Sadler's Wells.⁴⁴ The dramaturgy of these topical plays also represents a noticeable departure from the conventions of legitimate drama, and especially from the traditions of benevolence and reconciliation at the heart of sentimental comedy. Here, by contrast, good and evil are irreconcilable opposites, and the confrontation between them is characteristically imagined in physical terms. A recurring topos in these plays, for instance, is the 'blow-up', a spectacular explosion which destroys the tyrant's or usurper's castle. In many ways, the blow-up might seem to exemplify that theatre of meretricious spectacle so lamented by the defenders of 'The Drama'. But from a different perspective the blow-up actually marks a radical departure in the dramatisation of nation and empire. It makes representable in an entirely new way that irreducible confrontation between freedom and despotism, good and evil. In so doing, the dramaturgy of illegitimate theatre implicitly reveals the failure of rationality, the inadequacy of rhetoric and the impossibility of benevolence. What the blow-up silently confirms, in other words, is the collapse of legitimate genres such as sentimental comedy as ideological models for the dramatisation of a modern nation.

The dramaturgy of war at the minor theatres evolved in the face of legal contingency, namely an unwritten ban on spoken dialogue. But did this mean that performers must be mute? On the contrary, rhyming couplets and dramatic recitative, accompanied by music, provided two important kinds of illegitimate speech at the minor theatres. Then, from the 1790s onwards, playhouses began to circumvent the ban on spoken dialogue by the use of linen scrolls, also known as flags or banners. The scrolls were inscribed with small portions of dramatic speech (idiosyncratic spellings often provided a source of amusement for some educated

⁴⁴ Arundell, *The Story of Sadler's Wells*, 60ff.

spectators) and held aloft on stage by the performers for the audience to read.⁴⁵ John Cross' *Circusiana* plays provide a useful example of these techniques in practice.

The *Circusiana* exist in a theatrical hinterland between circus and theatre, between physical spectacle and dramatic forms based on the primacy of rhetoric.⁴⁶ Cross's plays include *Sir Francis Drake and Iron Arm* (Royal Circus, August 1800) 'in which the cool courage, and exemplary humanity of the English admiral, is forcibly contrasted by the cruelty, meanness, and perfidy of a savage outlaw',⁴⁷ *The Fire King; Or, Albert and Rosalie* (Royal Circus, June 1801) and a collection of overtly patriotic pieces such as *Our Native Land, and Gallant Protectors* (Royal Circus, July 1803). Various defined as *ballets d'action*, spectacles and melodramas, the plots of Cross' musical plays, several of which were staged at the patent theatres, included mythological narratives and a Kotzebue drama as well as popular tales of Gothic skulduggery. Sometimes implicitly, more often overtly, the *Circusiana* exploited audiences' enthusiasm about seeing Napoleonic bogeymen and sturdy British heroes portrayed on stage. Melodramas such as *The Great Devil; or, The Robber of Genoa* (1801) and *Jack the Giant Killer* (1803) at Sadler's Wells, many written with starring parts for Grimaldi, and music by Russell and Reeve, shared similar themes of menace, devilish treachery and triumphant patriotic virtue.⁴⁸

These plays abound with Gothic horrors in the form of skeletons and apparitions. Most are set in wild and picturesque scenery, whether in the Appenine mountains (*Rinaldo Rinaldini*), in a distant sea view after a tempest (*The False Friend*) or on the edge of a precipice in the West Indies (*Blackbeard; or, The Captive Princess*). Airs, ballads and choruses punctuate the dumbshow action, as well as dances and 'warlike', 'slow' or 'soft' musical accompaniments. Cross' texts carefully notate the bodily expression of emotion: characters shudder, tremble and form a group 'expressive of the utmost terror' and at the sight of a figure in transparent armour, Sitric the villainous Dane appears 'with all the horror of guilt marked on his countenance and trembling limbs'.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ See report in *Morning Chronicle*, 21 January 1812. On the fashion for transparent inscriptions, and a theatrical accident arising from the last-minute preparation of scrolls, see Charles Dibdin, *Memoirs of Charles Dibdin the Younger*, ed. George Speaight (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1956), 100.

⁴⁶ *Circusiana; or A Collection of the most favourite Ballets, Spectacles, Melo-dramas, &c. performed at the Royal Circus, St. George's Fields*, 2 vols. (London: T. Burton, 1809). Reprinted as *The Dramatic Works of J.C. Cross* (London: printed for the author, 1809). ⁴⁷ *Monthly Mirror*, August 1800, 111.

⁴⁸ Charles Dibdin, *The Great Devil; or, The Robber of Genoa*, CMT xiv.

⁴⁹ *The Round Tower; or, The Chieftains of Ireland* (Covent Garden 1797), in *Circusiana* 1: 17.