

INTRODUCTION

Harlequin Empire: Race, Ethnicity and the Drama of the Popular Enlightenment will explore the presentation of other cultures on the British stage during the long eighteenth century, with emphasis on the period after 1750. It will particularly concentrate on popular or plebeian forms of drama such as harlequinade, pantomime, burletta and spectacle which developed outside London's royal theatres, Covent Garden, Drury Lane and the Haymarket. The popularity of theatre is not in doubt. As far as the British context is concerned, the mechanism for the distribution of theatrical performance was enabled by the networks of metropolitan and provincial playhouses, theatrical circuits and groups of strolling players which are the subject of Chapter 1. Some overall idea of the scale of Georgian period theatricality can be briefly stated.

Audience sizes for George Colman the Younger's *Inkle and Yarico* (1787) in the decade following its first performance at the Haymarket probably approached around one million. Performed at least fourteen times at the 1,800 capacity Haymarket (which was limited by its short summer season), *Inkle and Yarico* was quickly taken up by the 3,000 seat Covent Garden and, by 1788, had reached the English provincial theatrical circuits where seating capacities probably averaged around 1,000 persons. It was still being performed in Scarborough, Yorkshire, in 1830.¹ In just two seasons at Covent Garden, 1788–90, it was performed twenty-four times. Assuming two-thirds full houses, this implies audiences at that theatre of around 48,000 persons.² By 1794, it had been performed and printed in Boston, Massachusetts.³ For most people, *Inkle and Yarico* would have been their primary point of contact with literary expressions of anti-slavery sentiment. In provincial England it was immediately recognized 'as capable of *writing* a petition for the abolition of the slave-trade as any of those associated bodies who have taken so much pains for that laudable purpose', although its place as a vehicle for disseminating abolitionist sentiment has been ignored by modern historians of slavery.⁴ A different version of this story of a native American woman threatened with slavery, Jean François Arnould-Mussot's 'grand serious Pantomime Entertainment', *The American Heroine* (sometimes also given the Colman title), was performed at both the Haymarket and at London's Royal

Circus, a venue seating around 2,000 people, before similarly crossing the Atlantic to reach the even larger Lailson's Circus in Philadelphia where its cultural context and reception history must have been markedly transformed.⁵ As will be discussed below, both of these dramas amount to test cases for how race was represented on stage. For Arnould Mussot's *The Death of Captain Cook* (1789), the subject of much of Chapter 6, its twenty-eight Covent Garden performances during the 1789–90 season alone imply an audience of 56,000, although, again, it was quickly taken up by both the provincial and transatlantic theatres.⁶ However, the practice of having a mainpiece and an afterpiece means that audience figures tend to compound. On some nights, such as 3 November 1789, Covent Garden paired *Inkle and Yarico* with *The Death of Captain Cook*. If one includes productions on both sides of the Atlantic (*The Death of Captain Cook* had reached Canada by the late 1790s), this originally Parisian production was also probably seen by about a million people in the decade following 1788. In all cases, literacy was not required. For *The Death of Captain Cook* and *The American Heroine*, neither was an understanding of English.

Studies such as Richmond Barbour's *Before Orientalism: London's Theatre of the East, 1576–1626* (2003) and Bridget Orr's *Empire on the English Stage 1660–1714* (2001) have demonstrated the persistent fascination for portraying other cultures on the English stage. Within a shorter temporal parameter, Daniel O'Quinn's *Staging Governance: Theatrical Imperialism in London, 1770–1800* (2005) has recently deployed a Foucauldian framework to argue that London theatres were designed to de-individuate audiences into a subgenial collective disciplined to spectate stage plays imbricated with Britain's imperial motives. All three critics stress that drama provided important ways through which other cultures and races were mediated to British popular audiences. Although it encompasses the same period, my own approach has been rather less ambitious than O'Quinn's, particularly in acknowledging that the texts of spoken dramas performed in Georgian London were subject to direct intervention by the state and that any mechanism for promoting imperialist theatrical agendas would inevitably have been connected to these official regulatory processes.⁷ Since stage censorship was clearly available as a mechanism capable of prohibiting allegedly deviant cultural behaviours, such as black advocacy, interracial marriage or racial civil equality, the absence of such deletions by the Lord Chamberlain is worthy of note and, on the face of it, appears to compromise O'Quinn's thesis.

Although my study makes frequent reference to native Americans, Tahitians, Australian Eora, Islamic Indians and north Africans, ethnicity itself was imperfectly understood on the Georgian stage. Of course, except for the dramas in which Ira Aldridge performed at the Royal Coburg Theatre, discussed in Chapter 3, all of these groups were invariably represented on stage by white actors who may (or may not), have elected to wear blackface or one the range of colour-

ing possibilities discussed in Chapter 2. In the eighteenth century, as Roxann Wheeler's important study, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (2000) has shown, it was the perception of social rank or class which dictated the signifying blackness of the ethnically African. As will be argued in Chapter 6, a traveller from Tahiti in O'Keefe and de Loughborough's *Omai; or, A Trip round the World* (1785) could be counterfeited to look like an African.

Perhaps the best way of understanding the inclusions and omissions in representations of ethnicity in the theatre is to consider a speaker in 'a New and Splendid Equestrian and Pedestrian Romantic Melodrame', performed at the newly built Olympic Pavilion theatre in Wych Street, off the Strand near Drury Lane. George Male's *One Foot by Land, or One Foot by Sea, or the Tartars Tartared* (1811) was performed at Philip Astley Jr's plebeian, illegitimate, theatrical space which aimed both to provide a more comfortable winter season for Astley's horse dramas and also to discomfort Covent Garden's success with Matthew G. Lewis's hippodrama, *Timour the Tartar* (1811). Set vaguely in 'upper Tartary', it had to quickly establish its regional location, requiring one of its characters to describe both Russia ('every Mothers Soul of 'em is whisker'd up to the Eyes like a Muscovy Cat') and China:

the land of China, where the Men have no Snouts to their Mugs & the Women, sweet dears, no feet to their Legs, and tho' they've their heads shaved from the day of their birth every living Creature of 'em, from the Prince to the Shoe black, wears a great big strapping Tail as long as the handle of a Broom so he does. Och! Says I to myself, if I had but the docking of you, what a charming Periwig Shop I could set up with a beautiful Bow window in Bond Street.⁸

Noticeably, Chinese people are minimally described through the physical results of the genetic codes which have delivered their ethnic appearance ('Men have no Snouts'). Instead, the description of the Chinese is dominated by their customs of head shaving, pig-tail wearing and feet binding, to which the joke about Bond Street 'Periwig Shop' is a rapid attempt at domestication. Colour and other physical Chinese racial characteristics do not signify. It was racial confusion about Chinese people which probably led James Gillray in his caricature print etching, *A Sale of English Beauties in the East* (1786), to unconvincingly portray an Indian merchant with a long drooping moustache, which, in turn, was sufficient to prompt two Chinese characters, Nankeen and Japan, to appear in Edward Topham's Covent Garden farce, *Bonds without Judgment; or, The Loves of Bengal* (1787).⁹ *Bonds without Judgment* makes a number of allusions in its dramaturgy to Gillray's print, but Topham's farce is otherwise bewildering in its designation of ethnicity. Indians are 'blacks' ('stand away you black Beetles') yet Japan says 'my Complexion is a little upon the Tawny', the colour in which

Othello was then played (as Rede, below, records). When one of the incoming English ‘outward bound Venuses’ arrives in Topham’s very topical Warren Hastings-impeachment-era narrative of white women seeking rich husbands in the east, her comments describe India in a manner completely unexpected:

Sophy: ... I am not over fond of the Complexions of this Country: black & yellow are the reigning Colors [*sic*] I see, Mr. Nankeen.

Nankeen: Psha! Black or white makes no difference.¹⁰

Apart from Sophy’s startling omission of whiteness, guided by Roxann Wheeler’s *The Complexion of Race* (2000), one can begin to make some sense of this scene, but, quite clearly, Georgian notions of Chinese ethnicity in drama simultaneously encompassed ‘yellow’, ‘a little upon the Tawny’ and no apparent signifying colour. Indeed, what signifies ethnically in *Bonds without Judgment* are the social or cultural positions of Japan and Nankeen, who are superior in their local cultural power to the Indian ‘black Beetles’. Both of them are closely involved with the East India Company’s role in Bengal and Nankeen is quite specifically a Company agent (‘An’t I the Company’s Officer at Calcutta’). How this was performed on stage, whether in yellowface, for example, is uncertain, but then much of the era’s theatricality remains obscure.

Of my own assumptions, I take it as axiomatic that by the mid-1810s, London’s theatres can no longer be defined as places exhibiting stable relationships between actors and their audience catchments. Instead, new playhouses such as the Adelphi, Royal Coburg, and Royalty Theatre frequently became the sites of contested encounters with organizations including Christian evangelical groups, the Society for the Suppression of Vice and the patent theatres, with their sporadic litigious forays. Outside the more regular theatrical venues, central London became increasingly populated by fugitive ‘spouting clubs’ and urban private theatres, venues which not only presented a culturally dominant popular or plebeian theatricality, but which also significantly unsettled conventional relationships between spectating and acting.¹¹ A crucial matter for my discussion, as outlined in Chapter 2, is the role of blackface make-up for white actors in both public and private theatres. Barbour, Orr and O’Quinn have largely neglected this theatrical convention despite Eric Lott’s powerful study, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993) which implies that minstrelsy endures as an endemic presence within modern America’s cultural politics.¹² In O’Quinn’s study, it is not clear whether actors performing in dramas which represented Indian or Pacific characters blacked up or not – or whether it matters.

These potentially explosive problems about the theatrical representation of race, together with the role of persistent regulatory intervention, comprise the two central issues around which any study of Georgian drama needs to be resolved. In the former case, for the issue of race, the defining cultural moment

was when the black American Ira Aldridge stepped onto the stage of London's Royal Coburg Theatre in October 1825. In the latter case, on the issue of regulation, the pivotal point was the *Report from the Select Committee on Dramatic Literature: With The Minutes of Evidence ... 2 August 1832*. It is arguable that eighteenth and early nineteenth-century British drama was continuously restructuring or reinventing itself to accommodate these two events. Nevertheless, as with the implications of theatre audience sizes discussed above, the sheer volume of writing for the stage makes generalization difficult. The Larpent collection of texts sent for licensing to the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays (covering prologues through to five-act dramas) lists nearly 2,400 items between 1737 and 1824, which equates to a rate of one new text for stage performance every fortnight, a figure excluding the important category of non-speaking pantomime (which did not require a license). Given these huge numbers, together with the great diversity of audience cultures and the multiplicity of venues, sudden reversals in what appear to be overt and stable ideological meanings can be expected.

While it would be natural to assume that pantomimes such as O'Keefe and de Louthembourg's *Omai* (1785) or Arnould-Mussot's *The Death of Captain Cook* – both discussed in Chapter 6 – celebrate British imperial power, any interpretation of their empire-building role needs to be congruent with *The Caffres; or, Buried-Alive!*, a Covent Garden comic opera produced in 1802 and attributed to Edmund John Eyre.⁴³ The licensing text's intention (with the deletions struck through here) was to call its comic hero 'Captain Byron', an allusion to the explorer and naval officer, Admiral John Byron (1723–86), but this name was deleted throughout and replaced by 'Captain Circuit a Navigator'. In other words, as part of a regulatory misadventure resulting from the Lord Chamberlain's objection to the naming of a distinguished deceased naval officer, the principal comic dupe of *The Caffres* is even more clearly referenced to Captain Cook. When shipwrecked off 'Natal; a Country on the East-Coast of Africa', Captain Circuit and 'Dr. Chimera' – an apparent allusion to Dr. Daniel Solander (1733–82), who had had an island named after him in 1768 – show no sympathy for the drowned sailors and, indeed, the entire scene comprehensively parodies voyaging narratives, feats of exploration and the acquisition of imperial domains:

Enter Captn Byron Circuit & Dr. Chimera.

Byron Circuit: I take possession of this Country in the Name of his Brittanic-Majesty!

Chimera: Now do call it after my name; for what a pleasure it will be to all my friends in England, to see in every Map and Chart, Dr. Chimera's Land.

Byron Circuit: This is a discovery that will immortalize my name, Oh what an entertaining narrative, of perils, & escapes; Every one will inquire for Byron's-Circuit's

Voyage round the World, where they will read, how that, adventurous Circumnavigator, accompanied by the learned, and philanthropic Dr. Chimera, Explor'd the utmost Limits of the Ocean.

There could hardly be a more explicit subversion of the imperial ideology alleged to lie behind the 'British sword' Omai receives 'from mighty George our sovereign lord' discussed in Chapter 7, notwithstanding that this performance took place at one of London's royal theatres. Given that there already existed an established mechanism for censorship, and that it had operated here to interdict a possible reference to a particular naval hero, stage representations undermining Britain's supposedly pervasive imperial ideology were not prohibited.

Suppositions concerning anxieties of racial miscegenation in Georgian drama are similarly belied if one examines a broad cross-section of plays. In Robert Jephson's *The Campaign; or, Love in the East Indies* (1784), first produced at Dublin's Smock Alley, and then at Covent Garden, much of the plot is concerned with a young Indian sepoy officer's courtship of a white woman.¹⁴ As the licensing copy made clear: 'Saib ... [is] An East Indian, in love with Miss Seymour ... / Miss Lucy Seymour ... [is] A rich & beautiful Heiress in love with Saib'. Significantly, given the climate of misgiving over Warren Hastings, the only racism Lucy encounters concerning her forthcoming marriage comes from her guardian, a Commisary of the East India Company:

Commisary: In short have you so little British blood in your veins, that you would consent to be of a seraglio.

Lucy: Such ideas never entered into the thoughts of the person you refer to – nor can they have a moments place in my imagination.

Commisary: You are ignorant of the Laws and Customs of different climes, Nations and Countries – I know more of the world – therefore from this moment, I prohibit any further intercourse between you and this Luxurious profligate, and abandon'd East Indian.

The Commisary's comments run the predictable gamut of orientalist constructions (confirming their availability within the contemporary lexicon) but they feature as targets of satire. Both in London and Dublin, audiences were obviously comfortable with representations of interracial marriage, an outcome even blessed at the end by the comically misogynistic General Howitzer (mischevously assigned to the actor Ralph Wewitzer (1748–1825)): 'Well young gentleman you are resolv'd to be noos'd ...'. Of course, in the eighteenth century, what defined race was class, and Saib was obviously deemed to be socially equal to the English heiress. The currency of such popular and positive cultural attitudes towards India in the mid-1780s is particularly important to establish because – if they ever disappeared – they had clearly returned by the late 1810s.

As will be shown in Chapters 4 and 7, which discuss William Barrymore's *El Hyder; or, The Chief of the Ghaut Mountains* (1818), H. M. Milner's *Tippoo Saib; or, The Storming of Seringapatam* (1823) and William Thomas Moncrieff's *Van Diemen's Land! Or, Settlers and Natives* (1830), playhouses such as the Royal Coburg and the Surrey Theatre – which were situated beyond the Lord Chamberlain's regulation – produced plays which allowed their Islamic Indian and aboriginal Tasmanian characters to definitively articulate protests against British invasion, British hostage taking and the genocide of native people. Moncrieff's speeches for his character in *Van Diemen's Land!* who is based on the historical Bennelong (c. 1764–1813) – actually a New South Wales Eora – presents a remarkable theatrical caveat to Deirdre Coleman's discussion of British encounters with Australian Aboriginals in her study, *Romantic Colonization and British Anti-Slavery* (2005).¹⁵ The ability of such playhouses to mount this counter-narrative to the dominant imperial ideology is crucial to confirm. However, while my study implies that dramas were less, rather than more, likely to be co-opted into normative cultural attitudes – and that British theatre was remarkably assimilative of the different ethnicities portrayed on stage – there were some world regions much more turbulently debated. The most notable of these regions were the north African Ottoman regencies, or Barbary states, the British and American dramas about which are the subject of Chapter 5. The longevity of Barbary piracy, which made southern Mediterranean sailing passages dangerous for fear of interception and enslavement, ensured that cultural attitudes to this region were neither progressive nor even predictable. Despite continued diplomacy, safe passage for international shipping was not guaranteed until the French occupation of Algiers in 1830. Attitudes to the north Islamic African states were particularly fractured in contemporary American writing. James Ellison's *The American Captive, or Siege of Tripoli* (Boston, 1812) clearly envisaged the destructive American occupation of the entire region. Running in tandem as a fault line in these American dramas were a set of contradictory attitudes towards the issue of white enslavement in north Africa and black slavery in America.

However, the framework for any discussion of British Georgian drama must begin with the regulatory system, which was complex, contradictory and fraught with provisions necessitated by censorship, customary practice, ancient privilege and commercial and legal pressure. While these conditions are not capable of easy summary, they were structural, persistent, and directly affected all writing for the stage and all modes in which drama could be performed. Arguably, the formidable complexity and intrusiveness of regulation was such that, to contemporaries, a 'mental theatre' of unperformed or so-called 'closet' dramas appeared an attractive alternative.¹⁶ Interpreting the contemporary regulatory system will be a continuing theme paralleling this book's main argument that Geor-

gian drama was the culturally dominant mode for providing representations of national identity, war, discovery, changing relationships with other cultures and the complexities of an ever-growing empire. Chapter 7's discussion of a moving 'peristrepthic' panorama featured within a Pacific drama and performed in one of south London's illegitimate playhouses, gives an indication of how theatre became such a culturally dominating presence. Beyond the individual playhouse, the physical vehicle for the transmission of these ideas and images was the Georgian network of theatrical circuits, private playhouses and strolling players. The regulatory environment and physical structures of these theatres, together with their players and repertory, form the basis on which this book is founded.

The structural conditions of contemporary drama fall into two categories. The first is the system of theatrical regulation, the patchwork of laws, monopolies and commercial activities which formed the drama into its generic shapes. The second category is the national network of Georgian playhouses which delivered plays to audiences. While the royal theatres (with their patent monopoly), were free to perform any type of genre, the non-patent houses in London were confined to pantomime or burletta. These rules were primarily enforced by the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays, the censor. The Examiner had control over the textual content of all stage dramas within the City of Westminster (effectively, the majority of London north of the Thames) together with the provincial royal theatres outside Ireland. As well as objecting to new London playhouses, including those outside the Westminster boundary, the patentees also rejected attempts to encroach upon their perquisite of spoken drama. An important legal judgement in 1821 ruling against the Royal Coburg Theatre maintained the patentees' monopolistic power throughout the period covered by this book.¹⁷ A further level of complexity was that, while the Westminster playhouses and the provincial royal theatres were licensed by the Lord Chamberlain, the others came under the control of local magistrates. In addition, while censorship tended to erase blasphemy, political innuendo or unwarranted social satire, such interceptions of literary text were unpredictably implemented. When coupled to the vigilantly litigious tendencies of the royal theatres, these were harsh circumstances under which to write for the stage.

The material consequences of such a regulatory environment were considerable. For example, drama in London until the late 1830s was scarcely able to support (on any one winter's night) eight speaking actresses or eighteen to twenty speaking male actors. For new entrants to the profession, such as Ira Aldridge, who wanted to specialize in the speaking repertoire, the more interiorized and reflective roles for black men such as Othello or Zanga in Young's *Revenge* were only available in the provinces. The imposition of burletta as the dominant category of vocalized dramatic performance in London at the non-patent theatres meant that music and song were pervasive. Genres such as melodrama, the

gothic, romance or pastoral were only permissible on the London non-patent stage if they were rendered into burletta or pantomime. As far as verbal expression was concerned, musicality was the key element defining legality.¹⁸ When, in 1813, James Lawrence's *Dramatic Emancipation, or Strictures on the State of the Theatres* (citing an article in *The Morning Chronicle*) noted that London's theatres had an estimated audience capacity of 29,500, he was well aware that less than 20 per cent of those people would witness a spoken drama and much less than that number during the summer months.¹⁹ Inevitably, as a result of this regulatory regime, burletta and pantomime – marginally supplemented by the royal theatres' spoken plays – became the principal generic vehicles for the drama discussed in this book.

If the royal patent houses, with their close links to the Lord Chamberlain and the protection of the royal prerogative, dominated the London scene, by 1800 there had concurrently developed a national network of theatres. These playhouses provided the means by which drama could circulate. Any one of the plays discussed in this book should be considered as potentially capable of being propelled along this theatrical network as the provincial playhouses took up the London hits. Lemman Thomas Rede's manual for actors, *The Road to the Stage; or, The Performer's Preceptor* (1827), with its elaborate instructions for how to obtain employment, was itself an indication of the viability – for both sexes – of a provincial acting career. Rede made his first acting appearance in 1819 at the theatre in Stafford in the English Midlands, playing Wilford in George Colman the Younger's, *The Iron Chest* (1796), a Drury Lane adaptation of William Godwin's novel *Caleb Williams; or, Things as They Are* (1794).²⁰ William St Clair's *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (2004) notes that Godwin's novel had reached four printed editions by 1816, priced at around 18 shillings, but far more people would have seen its adaptation into *The Iron Chest* than ever read the novel. Even its first night performance placed it in a theatre capable of holding around 3,000 people and, as Rede's testimony shows, it clearly became a provincial repertory staple.²¹ With a box seat costing 3 shillings, diminishing to 1 shilling in the pit (half-price after the mainpiece), *The Iron Chest* must have seemed far more tempting than buying the expensive *Caleb Williams*, yet Colman's play had also reached five printed editions by 1819 when Rede performed in it.²² Notably, within such a politically regulated stage, Colman took care to distance himself from Godwin's radicalism, steering clear of the 'Politicks; with which, many have told me, *Caleb Williams* teems' and, true to his later post as Examiner of Plays from 1824, adding that 'The stage has, now, no business with Politicks: and, should a Dramatick Author endeavour to dabble in them, it is the Lord Chamberlain's office to check his attempts, before they meet the eye of the Publick.'²³

Neither was performance the only cultural intervention provoked by drama. *The Iron Chest* was augmented by Colman's pamphlet quarrel with Drury Lane's manager, John Philip Kemble, about the latter's professional inefficiency.²⁴ Once one adds to such pamphleteering the publication of theatrical music (the *Songs, Chorusses, &c. in The Iron Chest* (1796) were sold directly at the theatre), there unfolds a further level of literary production not covered by St Clair. Indeed, the cultural role of drama percolated deep into society. Stephen Storace's setting of 'Down by the river there grows a willow tree' from *The Iron Chest* was scored for two voices and the newly popular piano. The significance of such musical arrangements is that they were clearly aimed for performance, often by women, within the domestic household.²⁵ This propensity for drama to invigorate new social contexts of performance and dissemination provides the structural basis for the theatrical transmission routes described in this book. A description of this theatrical network is the subject of the next chapter.

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