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Theatric Revolution: Drama, Censorship and Romantic Period Subcultures 1773–1832

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David Worrall

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Robert Poole

At the centre of David Worrall's *Theatric Revolution* a striking tableau is unveiled. It is around 1800, and we are at a private party in London, attended by leading Whigs including the playwright-politician Sheridan. The arrival of a surprise guest is announced, and curtains are drawn back to reveal a cleverly-lit female figure on a pedestal, 'feigning a statue'. An electric ripple of recognition runs round the room: it is Caroline, estranged wife of the Prince Regent, and she is in the character of Hermione in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, a wronged queen turned to stone by a jealous king. From hollow marriage to staged funeral, Caroline's public career was a series of benefit performances. In 1821, after her return to England as would-be queen, Caroline scooped the carefully-laid publicity for her husband's coronation by acting as patron of the Royal Coburg theatre, an illegitimate theatre named after Caroline's son-in-law, Prince Leopold of Saxe Coburg, which paraded an alternative-version royal theatricality from the unruly south bank of the Thames. Worrall's central chapter brilliantly recovers a lost side of the Queen Caroline affair, tracing through this one absorbing episode the roots and branches of the theatrical political culture of later-Georgian England.

Worrall describes the episodic studies of this rich new book as 'theatrical microhistories' (p. 133). Some of these microhistories stand alone, but two themes structure groups of chapters: censorship, and political theatre. His stated aim, as a scholar based in an English literature department, is to 'go beyond close reading' (p. 146) to historical context, and in this aim the book often, but not always, succeeds. Its virtues and its limitations raise wider issues about the limitations of text-centred cultural history, and about the (in part)

unstated assumptions upon which the book rests.

The book opens with two strong declarations: 'Theatricality was a mode of public being, a representation of the self that was not confined to dramas performed in the playhouses' (p. 2) and, 'links between theatre, the visual arts (including popular prints), and the popular press provide much of the basis for understanding Georgian behaviour' (p. 3). Similar assertions punctuate the rest of the text: 'theatrical subcultures permeate the period' (p. 30); 'theatricality was rooted in just about every imaginable sphere of contemporary life, permeating Georgian culture' (p. 218). 'By the late 1810s', argues Worrall, 'drama was the primary literary form mediating between the British people and national issues', reinforced by the rapid development of print culture to produce, 'a change in the national infrastructure of public expression' (p. 274). In conclusion, he reiterates the case for a 'vast groundswell of popular theatricality' in the late-Georgian period. The attendant conflicts made theatres, 'laboratories not only of social activism but also of regulatory tactics' (pp. 361–2). This is confident and assertive cultural history. How well does it come off?

The regulation of drama is the subject of the early chapters. A pervasive and effective censorship, argues Worrall, was the dominant fact of later-Georgian theatre; we are clearly revisiting some of the territory covered in his earlier book *Radical Culture* (1). Worrall is critical of other scholars of romantic-era culture for having overlooked the determining influence of censorship. The failure to appreciate this has, he suggests, distorted a whole field of scholarship. Well, maybe, but in that case he should be offering a coherent alternative scenario. The following chapter on 'The Regulation of the Theatres' is, however, less successful, dealing with its subject in a somewhat piecemeal way, and leaving this reader still in the dark about the exact framework of regulation. Those looking for a more structured approach can turn to Jane Moody's more institutional study, *Illegitimate Theatre in London* (2), which Worrall himself finds 'excellent' (p. 18). Whereas Moody sees an escalating and ultimately successful series of challenges to the monopoly of the three London patent theatres in this period, for Worrall the position of the patents was largely maintained until 1832, in active collusion with a state hegemony sustained by monopoly, censorship and political repression. The subsequent case study in Chapter 2 of the laboured suppression of the minor Royalty Theatre in the east end in the late 1780s and early 1790s does not bear out either scenario particularly strongly. It is hard to see the basis for the concluding claim that through this episode the 'government must also have learned how to prosecute political radicals' (p. 87).

Chapter 3 strikes gold, in the form of a focused study of the thirty-year run of the manuscripts of the official Examiner of Plays, John Larpent, in the Huntington Library. Worrall details the remarkable part played by Larpent's wife, Anna, in the process. Theatre censorship appears as an 'unofficial cottage industry' which a 'husband and wife team ... administered from their drawing room' (pp. 105, 107) as they read play scripts to each other by the fireside and erased any reference to revolution and subversion even in the most loyal of contexts. It was a 'lawless, unsystematic, highly personal monopoly of literary repression' (p. 115). As with the real Wizard of Oz, this is not quite what the preceding story of total hegemony had led us to expect; it is an enthralling piece of research.

Chapter 4, 'Theatrical Subcultures', deals with the 'communities of skill' surrounding the scene designer and pyrotechnician, Philip de Louthembourg, in the 1770s and 1780s, and the networks of freemasons and artisans of which he was a part. This minutely-researched cultural history rests on a somewhat narrow base of individual examples, but it is integrated into a wider perspective in which concerns over deception and disguise in freemasonry are shown to be part of a wider fear over the social consequences of acting and imposture in many walks of life. Chapter 5, 'Political Microcultures', deals with the censorship of Thomas Dibdin's 1800 anti-free market play *The Two Farmers*. While the detailed research situating the play in the context of the 1800 food riots is impressive, Worrall is avowedly at a loss to explain the apparent contradiction of a loyalist playwright portraying volunteer troops taking the side of the food rioters, and the chapter fizzles out a fog of generalizations about social forces and boundaries crossed. There is no shortage of works on the changing context of wartime loyalism to help unravel this conundrum (3).

Next, at the heart of the book, come two splendid chapters on 'The Theatricalization of British Popular Culture'. The Queen Caroline chapter we have already looked at. The second is ambitiously subtitled 'A

General Historical Anthropology’, and covers a lot of ground. Worrall brings home the physicality of the theatre-going experience, which provided a rare common arena in which all classes, from royalty to the unruly youth of the galleries, could participate—and, indeed, perform. He goes on to delineate, in a well-structured way, the various cultural tributaries of commercial drama: the actors themselves, who were part of the metropolitan low life which they often portrayed; the song and supper clubs of the 1820s and 1830s, ‘where theatre, literature, and the popular culture of the street met together in clouds of speech, song, alcohol, and tobacco’ (p. 241); the tavern ‘spouting clubs’ of the mid-eighteenth to early-nineteenth centuries (home of Ian McCalman’s *Radical Underworld*) (4); the booming unregulated private theatres of the 1820s with their disturbing ‘paedophilic tastes’ (p. 252); the penny theatres frequented by young urban working-class audiences from the 1830s; and (a real find, this) the working-class private theatres of the early-nineteenth century, a sort of thespian karaoke where people paid to perform. In a book of tightly-focused studies, this chapter stands out as one which not only deepens our understanding, but also makes structured sense of what we already know; it will be useful to undergraduates.

Three further microhistories follow, all dealing with examples of political drama. Chapter 8 features another coup in the form of the discovery of two loyalist plays written by the government spy James Powell, and of the text of an unperformed, but extremely interesting, play called *Plots and Placemen*, written by the London ultra-radicals as a boisterous riposte to the suspension of Habeas Corpus in March 1817—a text which eluded even Ian McCalman. Upon such texts Worrall builds an argument for ‘an intimate but economically quite complex relationship between radical political and popular drama’ (p. 277). Chapter 9 deals with the Mary Ashford murder case of 1817–18, where, ‘dramatic writing and an emerging artisan theatre acted as a focus for dissertation of contemporary questions of legality, justice, politics, and, not least, the role of women’ (p. 339). Worrall offers an analysis of the various stage performances about the affair and a fascinating exposition of the antiquated device of the ‘trial by battle’ through which the alleged murderer sought melodramatically to fend off one of his accusers. Finally, there is a lively account, using the reports of police spies, of the theatrical goings-on at Richard Carlile’s Rotunda, particularly the staging of Carlile’s fearlessly seditious *Life of [Captain] Swing*—though not quite as lively, it has to be said, as Ian McCalman’s essay on the same subject, another conspicuous absentee from Worrall’s references (5).

The great strength of *Theatric Revolution* is the sheer richness of its exploration of the sources—and the book is written very close to its sources. The resourcefulness which Worrall brings to the work of linking people and places, texts and events is impressive, and the book resounds with the eureka moments of a decade’s lonely research. The format of a set of microhistories is probably the right one for this kind of work, which brings a talent for deep soundings to a range of neglected topics. Conversely, though, the book is open to criticism in its treatment of the wider picture. I will tackle three areas here: limited attention to secondary sources; the omission of melodrama; and the issue of literary versus historical methods.

Theatric Revolution is not strong in its use of the work of other authors, as has already been noticed. Worrall explains that, because of his disappointment with the reliability of secondary work, he has ‘chosen largely to rely on the interpretation of first-hand documents rather than on the insights of modern criticism’ (p. 28), but literary criticism and history are not quite the same thing. There is now quite a sizeable literature to show that later Georgian culture was in many ways highly theatricalized, and that a reaction set in against this in the 1800s, leaving in the 1810s and 1820s a highly theatrical popular political culture that was to find both its fulfilment and its finale in 1832. As Worrall remarks:

Something of this was picked up over forty years ago in E. P. Thompson’s memorable insight that ‘the vice of the English Jacobins ... was self-dramatization’. Certainly the link between political radicalism and a propensity for theatricality will be a persistent undercurrent in this book (p. 2).

But we already have rather more than a ‘persistent undercurrent’ to sail with. Jane Moody’s *Illegitimate Theatre in London* aims to provide a structured ‘institutional history’ of its subject that will ‘bring to life the

theatrical revolution' of the period in which 'the rebellion of the minor theatres against the patent houses merged imperceptibly with discourses of popular representation and dissent in the political sphere' (6). Julia Swindells' *Glorious Causes* argues (often through dramatic texts) that in the age of reform, popular theatre and melodrama made 'attempts to constitute a more democratic model of actors and audiences, in a performance space that would help to give the people their liberty' (7). Gillian Russell's *Theatres of War* uncovers a sort of military-theatrical complex, arguing that, 'The problem for the generals and politicians directing the war was that the theatricality which had attracted many men of the middling and lower orders to the ranks of volunteers was a sign that their loyalty was not to be trusted' (8). Anna Clark's more recent *Scandal* also deals with the interface between performance and politics (9). All of these are in Worrall's bibliography, but their powerful and structured insights are not drawn upon, and the contextualization of Worrall's episodic *Theatric Revolution* is the weaker for it.

One area that is conspicuously absent from Worrall's account is that of melodrama. His previous book, *Radical Culture*, aimed at 'eliminating melodrama' (10), but it is more puzzling to find him still avoiding it in a book on the theatre. 'Melodrama' is absent even from the index, although there is a lot of it in chapter 9—and, indeed, elsewhere. Melodrama has traditionally been seen as an impoverished and reactionary form, but Rohan McWilliam's survey article 'Melodrama for Historians' provides plenty of reasons for taking melodrama seriously as a radical form (11). Any medium characterized (as McCalman puts it) by 'utopianism, vilification of aristocrats, and commitment to absolute moral justice' ought to be of interest to the author of *Theatric Revolution*, but Worrall seems to have a blind spot here (12). Elaine Hadley's superb *Melodramatic Tactics* builds a whole cultural history around melodrama, arguing that 'the melodramatic mode' was 'a behavioural and expressive model for several generations of English people', and one which, like Worrall's illegitimate theatre, was opposed to romanticism. Hadley includes a penetrating study of the 1809 Old Price riots at Drury Lane, also covered in *Theatric Revolution* (13). The work of Anastasia Nikolopoulou and others on melodrama addresses some of Worrall's interests in political theatre, as does Louis James' 1977 essay 'Taking melodrama seriously' with its insights into the 'unexpected authenticity' of socially-based melodrama in the 1820s (14). More recently, Marc Brodies has demonstrated in striking detail the influence of performances of *Wat Tyler* and *Vive La Liberte* at the Royal Victoria Theatre (formerly the Coburg) on late Chartist crowds in London, arguing that 'the politics of the street and the politics of the stage could interact and reinforce each other' (15). *Theatric Revolution* could only have benefited from engagement with these, and other, historical works.

The explanation for the omission of melodrama may be that it muddies the sharp political boundaries between loyalism and radicalism that are one of the core assumptions of Worrall's work, both here and in the earlier *Radical Culture*. Melodrama, reacting against change in the name of traditional values, hardly fits the model; nor do the rioter-friendly volunteer troops who so puzzled Worrall in chapter 5. In *Radical Culture* the pervading vision was of Britain as 'a spy culture' (16). In *Theatric Revolution* the hegemony is that of the censor, a regime in which 'absolute lack of principle [was] coupled to a complete intention of implementing authority' (p. 47). We are here in a real Foucauldian pea-souper in which oppressors and oppressed blunder around in a fog of ever-contending discourse, the authorities always dominant, their subjects always resisting, the whole process producing a great deal of rhetoric but no real change—the politics of the theoretical left, transplanted into academia. There is a lot of struggling, but not a lot of change, in *Theatric Revolution*, and at the end in 1831 the patent theatres remain 'uninterrupted and undisturbed' (p. 365)—a sharp contrast to Moody's success story of illegitimate drama. It is worth noting that Hadley's *Melodramatic Tactics*, by contrast, while informed by Foucault, explicitly rejects his 'static archaeological model' as unable to account for historical specificity and change (17). Moody, Russell, and Hadley all offer more historically-grounded accounts of change than Worrall. Interestingly, though, this turns out to be not a fault line between literature and history, but one which runs through the discipline of English literature, as it runs through history.

Related to this somewhat static view of hegemony is a tendency to flip-flop between the very particular and the very general—between the foregrounded text and what is still sometimes referred to by literary scholars as 'the historical background'. Small items of evidence are held to vindicate large generalizations, as if one

sample of the historical ether—or one spoonful of the Foucauldian soup—was as good as any other. It is disconcerting, for example, to be told that a retrospective account of de Louthembourg, written at thirty years' distance by a known forger, 'serves to connect and empirically confirm the materiality of the historicism which has here been described' (pp. 165–6). Later, writing of two political plays, one written by a government spy and the other a pamphlet never seriously intended to be performed, Worrall states: 'these two works, along with the other plays discussed here, present definitive evidence that drama was the premier genre of choice for political activists' (p. 278). Again, we are asked to accept that a bit of early product placement in Dibdin's 1819 *Melodrame Mad*, in the form of puffs for the short-lived velocipede craze and for the century-old Sun and Norwich fire insurance companies, 'mark a qualitative transformation, a movement in popular theatre which was receptive towards the capital's increasing concern with intellectual property and social mobility as it developed in the nineteenth century' (p. 266). Generalizations such as these are scattered throughout the book, punctuating rather than structuring it. Quite why literary scholars (and indeed postmodernists) can be rigorous over textual details one minute and reach for easy generalizations the next is one of those mysteries of the age which may in time find its own cultural historian. I had to gather the overarching statements cited in the third paragraph of this review from throughout the book; it would have been interesting to have had them worked up by its author into a prologue or epilogue to frame the microhistories, rather than scattered around like clues.

The criticism has gone far enough, and it is time to recall the virtues of David Worrall's generally-excellent book. Literary scholars and historians have a habit of not quite seeing eye-to-eye over subjects of common interest and retiring to their corners disappointed. Worrall's work, with its energy-releasing fusion of text and context, demonstrates that this need not be so. He often works through texts, but overwhelmingly the text is invoked in service of the context rather than vice-versa (unlike in some versions of the new historicism). At their best, these theatrical microhistories are deeply researched and sparkle with insight, and historians and literary scholars alike will find them fascinating.

To finish with a piece of microhistory, I am not convinced that Worrall's identification of the prisoner-poet at the centre of the Spencean play *Plots and Politics* with Thomas Evans is the full story (pp. 303–7). An aspiring 'epic Miltonic poet', arrested at home near Manchester amongst 'pen, ink and paper', this figure also has much in common with Samuel Bamford, the Lancashire radical leader. The rising for which he was arrested is less likely to be the June 1817 Pentridge rising than the March 1817 Manchester rising, in connection with which the real Bamford was (mistakenly) arrested. Bamford had met the London ultra-radicals as part of a provincial delegation in January 1817, and claimed that the scheme to march on the capital from Manchester had 'followed us from London'. He also attended one of the London 'free-and-easies' (18). A few weeks later, parts of Southey's insurrectionary play *Wat Tyler* were read at another London free-and-easy. Shortly after that, on 26 March 1817, extracts from *Wat Tyler* were reprinted in the radical *Black Dwarf* on the very weekend of the Manchester rising. Perhaps they were connected, and perhaps (to make a lunge in the fog) elements of David Worrall's *Theatric Revolution* were also enacted in the provinces.

Notes

1. D. Worrall, *Radical Culture: Discourse, Resistance and Surveillance, 1790–1820* (Hemel Hempstead, 1992). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London 1770–1840* (Cambridge, 2000). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. I. C. Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture* (Cambridge, 1992); idem., 'William Cobbett and the Rural Radical Platform', *Social History* (1993); P. Spence, *The Birth of Romantic Radicalism: War, Popular Politics and English Radical Reformism, 1800–1815* (Aldershot, 1996); S. Semmel, *Napoleon and the British* (New Haven and London, 2004); J. E. Cookson, *The British Armed Nation 1793–1815* (Oxford, 1997). None of these is in Worrall's bibliography. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. I. McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Radicals and Pornographers in London, 1795–1840* (Cambridge, 1988). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. I. McCalman, 'Popular irreligion in early Victorian England: infidel preachers and radical theatricality

- in 1830s London', in *Religion and Irreligion in Victorian Society*, ed. R. W. Davis and R. J. Helmstadter (Routledge, 1992). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre*, pp. 1, 9, 146–7. [Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. J. Swindells, *Glorious Causes: the Grand Theatre of Political Change 1789–1833* (Oxford, 2001), p. 38. [Back to \(7\)](#)
 8. G. Russell, *Theatres of War: Performance, Politics and Society 1790–1815* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 50–1. Similarly for Hadley (n. 12 below, 'pervasive theatricality ... turned into fears of widespread imposture', p. 22). [Back to \(8\)](#)
 9. A. Clark, *Scandal: the Sexual Politics of the British Constitution* (Princeton University Press, 2004). [Back to \(9\)](#)
 10. Worrall, *Radical Culture*, p. 3. This earlier work also claimed to be 'a theorized book', which is much less explicitly the case with *Theatric Revolution*. [Back to \(10\)](#)
 11. R. McWilliam, 'Melodrama and the Historians', *Radical History Review*, 78 (2000), 57–84. [Back to \(11\)](#)
 12. McCalman, 'Popular irreligion in early Victorian England', p. 61. [Back to \(12\)](#)
 13. E. Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800–1885* (Stanford UP, 1995). [Back to \(13\)](#)
 14. *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre*, ed. M. Heys and A. Nikolopoulou (New York, 1996); L. James, 'Taking Melodrama seriously: theatre, and nineteenth-century studies', *HWJ*, 3 (1977), 153. [Back to \(14\)](#)
 15. M. Brodies, 'Free trade and cheap theatre: sources of politics for the nineteenth-century poor', *Social History*, 28 (2003), 353–4. [Back to \(15\)](#)
 16. Worrall, *Radical Culture*, p. 7. [Back to \(16\)](#)
 17. Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics*, pp. 9–10. [Back to \(17\)](#)
 18. S. Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical* (1844), pp. 23–5, 31. [Back to \(18\)](#)

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