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NEGOTIATION AND LEGITIMATION: THE BRITISH PERIODICAL PRESS AND THE STAGE
1832-1892

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

Matthew Scott Phillips, M.A.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University
1999

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"The manager who first invented the term 'Legitimate Drama,' was certainly a clever manager, and one who well knew his public. That term seems to act on some minds almost like a spell; by its own mere force, it has created a conviction...that plays which can be so called have a certain claim on public patronage..."

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the ways in which the eclectic magazine press of nineteenth-century Britain contributed to the definition of theatrical legitimacy. While the influence of magazines predates the nineteenth century, it was in the 1800s that mass distribution of periodicals became possible and an explosion in periodical readership occurred. The technology for mass distribution made possible an increase in the influence of the magazine press several orders of magnitude beyond that which it had enjoyed in the eighteenth century, and allowed periodicals to assume a major role as social arbiters and formulators of opinion.

The dissertation examines the role of the periodical press in the legitimation of certain types of performance and certain categories of theatre, and specifically the ways in which the process of theatrical legitimation was bound to the concept of middle-class respectability. Employing several hundred theatre-related articles from a cross section of the most eclectic and broad-based Victorian magazines as a foundation for its conclusions, the dissertation examines the rhetorical strategies employed by the eclectic press throughout the nineteenth century, most particularly the mid- and late-century, which served to imbue certain forms of theatrical entertainment with an aura of cultural legitimacy.
The study demonstrates a number of insights into the role of the press as a definer of
taste and a formulator of opinion. It is undeniable that audience demographics changed
markedly during Victoria's reign, that theatre-going became much more acceptable to
people whose parents and grandparents would never have approved of doing so
themselves, and that the vocation of the actor became, as the century drew on, more and
more a profession into which a gentleman or respectable woman might enter. In this
sense, the British stage underwent a remarkable transformation—some would suggest
rehabilitation—during the nineteenth century. But these demographic and social trends
were dependent upon rhetorical definitions, the nature of the term "respectability," and
the parameters of the "legitimate". The rhetoric of the press is not hard data. One cannot
interpret the words of a periodical writer without taking into consideration the underlying
ideological constructs behind those words. A study of the rhetoric of the press suggests
that the nineteenth-century theatre's rehabilitation took place as much on the printed page
as it did in actual practice. The demographic changes so central to the history of the
nineteenth-century London stage were, of course, very real, but it was the rhetoric of
respectability and legitimacy that provided the paradigm through which those trends were
understood, and it was the press which played a major role in defining that paradigm.
Dedicated to Morgan L. and Marjorie J. Phillips
my parents and first teachers
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I would also like to recognize the fine collection of nineteenth-century periodicals held by the Ohio State University Library, and hereby express my appreciation for its open-stack policy, without which my research would have been very difficult indeed.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This is a study of the ways in which the eclectic press of nineteenth-century Britain contributed to the process of theatrical legitimacy. The nineteenth-century periodical press was a rapidly growing form of communication aimed predominantly at a middle-class readership. It is no coincidence that the number of articles pertaining to the theatre (excluding critical notices of particular productions) increased greatly as the century progressed and as theatres were becoming more dependent upon the patronage of an ever-more prosperous bourgeoisie. Early in the century many periodicals, such as Blackwood's Magazine, tended to treat drama purely as a literary category (conducive to a readership predisposed to the library and against the stage) or as a somewhat dubious artistic enterprise hopelessly in decline. By mid-century, however, the theatre began to emerge in many periodicals as a dynamic and positive art form, its traditions and practitioners often featured as objects of fascination on the part of certain prominent and widely read magazines. By the late nineteenth century the theatre was regularly represented in these periodicals as a pursuit on par with other respectable professions and its practitioners as leading, albeit sometimes colorful, citizens. It was through organs such as the magazine press, organs which reflected the unredacted opinion of the moment, that the perceptive reader will discover a process through which the theatre, its
practitioners and audiences were literally redefining themselves in light of the new social paradigm of middle-class "respectability." To a large extent, it was through the rhetoric of the magazine press that the theatre became imbued with a middle-class aura, by century's end, with a sense of legitimacy that went far beyond the legalisms associated with that term prior to the Theatres Act of 1843.

In broader terms, the dissertation's concern is what John Pick refers to as the "intangible and capricious commodity called public taste." More to the point, it is concerned with rhetorical strategies employed by the eclectic press throughout the nineteenth century, most particularly the mid- and late-century, which served to imbue certain forms of theatrical entertainment with an aura of cultural legitimacy. Bruce McConachie, in an essay extolling the usefulness of Antonio Gramsci’s theories for the project of theatre history, has described cultural hegemony as a process which works "primarily through legitimation, the half-conscious acceptance of the norms of behavior and the categories of knowledge generated by social institutions, public activities, and popular rituals viewed as 'natural' by the people whose actions they shape." It follows, then, that legitimation, while not necessarily implying a reductive model of conscious social domination on the part of a particular class or cabal, does on some level entail the suppression or co-optation of certain discourses or practices perceived as "illegitimate."

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1 John Pick, West End: Mismanagement and Snobbery (East Sussex: John Offord, 1983) 11.

Acculturation, according to the Gramscian model, is the process by which objects and practices are legitimated as being within lawful boundaries. In this sense, the study is about how certain theatrical practices and personages come to be seen as "legitimate," and how others are excluded.

**Historical Framework: The Question of Legitimacy**

It is well known that the panoply of laws and traditions regulating theatrical performance had, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, led to hopeless confusion regarding the nature and efficacy of the patents, the rights and privileges of the Lord Chamberlain and the essential properties of the drama itself. The major London theatres were those playhouses—the Theatres Royal Drury Lane and Covent Garden—which held royal patents, or were licensed to produce the regular drama for part of the year as was the case for the Haymarket theatre. The minor theatres were legally bound to produce only entertainments which could not be categorized as regular drama, a legal vagary which rendered the entire regulatory system ridiculously impractical. The major houses, therefore, had a monopoly on a commodity which had never been clearly defined.

On the thirteenth of June 1832, Mr. James Winston was called to testify before a parliamentary select committee appointed to investigate the laws and customs pertaining to the regulation of theatre and dramatic literature in Great Britain. Winston, who had

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3 The original patents were granted to William Davenant and Thomas Killigrew by Charles I. The patents entitled their holders to a monopoly on theatrical entertainment in London, and eventually became associated with Drury Lane and Covent Garden. In 1766 Samuel Foote was granted a license to produce plays at the Haymarket during the summer months, thus creating a third legitimate house. The legal privileges of the major houses were continually being challenged by enterprising managers of minor houses and unlicensed companies who either flaunted the law outright or cleverly capitalized on slippery definitions of legitimate drama.
spent over twenty years as a stage manager both at the Haymarket and Drury Lane, 4 was eminently qualified—or so the committee evidently assumed—to comment upon the qualities which separated the legitimate drama from the illegitimate. The following is an excerpt from the transcript of his testimony.

221. What do you consider is meant by the regular drama?—The regular drama I consider to be tragedy and comedy, and everything on the stage.

222. Burletta; do you consider that to be the regular drama?—Yes, because Tom Thumb was played in the regular theatres, and is printed and called a burletta.

223. What do you consider a burletta to be?—Recitative and singing; no speaking whatever: The Golden Pippen is a strong specimen of it, and Olympus in an Uproar.

224. Is Olympus in an Uproar the regular drama?—It is played at the regular theatres, and played under licence.

225. Do I understand you to include every stage representation: of course you must include Olympus in an Uproar, or anything of that kind?—I think the patent or the Lord Chamberlain's licence allows them to play anything, for regular drama includes everything.

226. Can you state what you consider to be not the regular drama?—I do not know; that is a very difficult thing to ascertain: if they can play everything, everything is the regular drama.

4 Great Britain, Parliament, Report From the Select Committee Appointed to Inquire into the Laws Affecting Dramatic Literature 1832; Irish University Press Series I, Marilyn L. Nordstedt, ed. (Shannon: Irish UP, 1968). Winston testified that he had been at the Haymarket "15 or 16 years, and at Drury Lane seven, I think" (18).
227. In short there is no species of stage representation (including dancing and tumbling) which is not the regular drama; pantomime also is the regular drama?—Pantomime is, because it was played originally at the regular theatres, time out of mind.

228. Do you consider pantomime the regular drama?—Under those circumstances it must be considered so, because it came out at the regular theatres.

229. Is Astley's the regular drama; is horsemanship the regular drama, or lions?—No, I should consider not; not lions certainly.

230. Is it everything that is performed at Covent Garden and Drury Lane?—It is a very difficult thing to say what is the regular drama and what is not.5

The most interesting aspect of Winston's testimony was not the confusion over legal distinctions (which was eventually made moot with the passage of the Theatres Act of 1843),6 but the degree to which neither Winston nor the committee was able to categorize theatrical practice rigorously. One questioner, obviously frustrated by Winston's equivocation, was moved to ask (somewhat incredulously) if the witness meant that everything "produced at regular theatres, however absurd and ridiculous is regular drama . . . ?"7 For Winston, "legitimacy" had little to do with the essential properties of entertainments; it was a function of association with "legitimate"

5 Select Committee (1832) 20.

6 Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that a new set of fuzzy legal distinctions replaced the old, as the tension between music hall and theatre replaced that between the patents and the minors.

7 Select Committee (1832) 20.
institutions. It should be no surprise that Winston, who had a vested interest in the welfare of the major theatres, should make his argument so circular and self-serving. In his view, the "legitimate" drama becomes anything historically produced on the "regular" stage. Since the patents were privileged to produce Shakespeare and Sheridan, but suffered no restrictions, it was convenient to define the "regular drama" as broadly as possible. Needless to say, managers of the minor theatres saw things differently.

Malleable as these terms were, "regular" and "legitimate" remained legalistic notions in the years prior to 1843. It was in that year the patents of the major houses, the Theatres Royal Drury Lane and Covent Garden, and the special license of the Haymarket Theatre, were nullified, and no longer were the three major houses legally protected against competition from the so-called illegitimate theatres. The exploding population of London and the advent of efficient public transportation ensured an expansion in the number of theatres, the growth of the West End, and a general boom in the entertainment industry.

Two days after Winston's testimony, John Payne Collier, an historian who had briefly acted as licenser of plays in the summer of 1831, gave a very different definition of "regular" drama, calling it anything "which has good dialogue, good characters, and good

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8 It should be noted that the committee, while never actually defining the "regular" drama in rigorous terms, proceeded to act on an implied definition less broad than Winston's. For example, on June 15, the (then) eminent historian J. Payne Collier was asked if the public, in his estimation, favored "regular drama, and not ... the burletta and vaudeville at present acted at the minor theatres." See Select Committee 1832; 25.

9 On June 20, 1832, Mr. G.B. Davidge, the proprietor of the Coburg, openly admitted to the committee that, despite a license limited to music and dancing, he was in the habit of presenting Shakespeare, having "fallen into the same course which other [minor theatre] managers have adopted before, without pretending to the legality of it." See Select Committee (1832) 76.
moral; I make the word 'legitimate,'" he continued, "as applied to drama, depend on the nature of the plot, characters and dialogue." Legitimacy, Collier maintained, was not determined by fixed standards, but by ever-changing notions of public taste, "the word morality . . . taken with reference to the age in which we live." For Collier, the concept of legitimacy was not so much bound to the law, but to public taste. Collier's testimony associating legitimacy with the ever-shifting perceptions of the public was prescient. Winston's notion of the legitimate was slippery enough in its hapless attempts to categorize; Collier's was more so, as it tied the definition of legitimacy to protean public notions of morality and propriety, and therefore to economics and social class.

The term "legitimate" is, of course, loaded with social and political significance, a term which suggests both legality and propriety. Timothy Murray cites seventeenth-century lexicographer John Bullokaf's definition of the legitimate "as anything lawfull, lawfully begotten." Legitimation, says Murray, "issues forth prescriptions of progeny and legality." To speak of "legality" is to imply an antonymous condition of "illegality," a counter-condition which makes possible a continual dialectic between the permissible and the forbidden. For Gramsci, dominant cultural practices are products of this dialectic, the result of an ongoing process of appropriation and assimilation.

10 Select Committee (1832) 27.

11 Select Committee (1832) 28.

Whenever a marginalized cultural practice becomes "purified" in the crucible of acculturation, we can say that it has been legitimated. In more concrete (and contemporary) terms, acculturation explains the phenomenon of right-wing Christian rock music or of white suburban teenagers who adopt the clothing styles and speech patterns of inner-city African-Americans.

It is undeniable that there was a major shift in audience demographics in the nineteenth century. An early view of nineteenth-century theatre demographics held that the theatres became more respectable as the theatres received more and more middle-class patronage. From 1811 to 1851, the population of London almost tripled in size, which along with the advent of mass transportation, meant a much larger market for entertainment than the city had ever had before. Theatres in the city exploded in numbers, precipitating the creation of London's fashionable West End, transpontine working-class theatres in the East End as well as tavern theatres and music halls. It was, however, London's West End which developed and maintained a reputation for respectability and fashion. This fashionable climate which made possible the pioneering work of Robertson and the Bancrofts, and led to such watersheds of theatrical legitimation as Kean's appointment as Master of Revels and Henry Irving's knighthood.¹³

That the theatre became more fashionable as the nineteenth century progressed is undeniable, if we accept the rather circular argument that activities or entities become "fashionable" when they are practiced or endorsed by the "fashionable" class. In the case of the nineteenth-century London stage, it becomes important to understand the constituent properties of the term "fashionable," and the ways in which nineteenth-

¹³ For a concise history of these demographic trends, see George Rowell, The Victorian Theatre (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967) 75-102.
century British fashionability was constructed ideologically and rhetorically. It can be argued that the middle class had been in a state of perpetual ascendency since the twelfth century, but it was in the nineteenth-century, fueled by the effects of the industrial revolution and the fruits of a mature empire, that the British middle-classes obtained their status as the country's true ruling class, economically and politically. It was during this period that the very concept of respectability was being born and defined along with this new class, and the embrace of the theatre by this class—as audience members and practitioners—was the reflection of a process in which a rising new socio-economic group co-opted and legitimated the theatre as its own. By doing so, it facilitated its own process of class self-definition. There is, in this historical moment, a close association between the notions of "legitimacy" and "respectability," two terms that are extremely difficult to categorically define, but which nevertheless should be examined and ideologically unpacked.

In *The Rise of Respectable Society*, F.M.L. Thompson cites the Reform Bill of 1832 as a watershed in the demarcation of class. Under the terms of reform the franchise was extended to all householders who occupied homes valued at a minimum of £10 per year. "It has often been remarked," notes Thompson,

that this action defined, even created, the working class by lumping together all those unable to afford to occupy a house of at least £10 annual value as unfit to exercise the franchise, thus forging a common bond of resentment and frustration between otherwise diverse social groups. The other side of this coin is that the franchise also defined the middle class as all those who came above the £10 line regardless of differences in social position.14


16. Thompson goes on to state that "[w]hile it is clear that the £10 householders did not constitute a single social class, since there were wide social differences within towns
So Thompson provides us with some criteria by which to define the middle class, at least in economic terms. But much more important than wealth or income is the more ambiguous criteria of "respectability," a social concept which, by mid-nineteenth century, enjoyed widespread currency. To be a respectable Victorian was not so much a function of economic class, but of cultural practice and attitude. This is not to say that economics and respectability were completely divorced—the middle-class ideal of respectability was, as Thompson points out, "dedicated to separate spheres: separate single-family houses, separation of work from home, and separation of women from work," and such an ideal would have been attainable only by households of substance. But respectability also implied a kind of industrious gentility, a quality which was not only held up as an ideal for the property-owning classes, but for the elite members of the working class as well. To be sure, social expectations and obligations for the property-owning were quite

between those who just qualified and those whose homes could be worth £50 or £100 a year, as well as between towns, it is also clear that this property qualification embraced virtually the entire population of middle-class family men, even if in some localities it also had the effect of bringing some artisans and skilled workers within the net. The middle class thus attached, in expectation, to the support of the constitution contained large numbers of small shopkeepers, traders, and dealers, small masters and lesser professional men, men of some consequence and influence in their communities but far removed in wealth and status from the great overseas merchants, the bankers and financiers, and the industrial capitalists" (19).

If we define class in terms of social groups with identifiable and clearly delineated interests, the distinction between such groups becomes slippery. A Tory amendment to the 1832 bill enfranchised the larger tenant farmers, or those worth at least £50 per year. How much, for instance, would a relatively prosperous, but propertyless, rural farmer identify his interests with those of his propertied landlord? Thompson holds that the Whigs were counting on the urban propertied class to counterweight the Tory sentiments of the county landlords, calculating an "increase in landlord influence stemming from tenant farmers' votes . . . " (21).

15 Thompson 197.
different for that of the respectable laborer, but both working-class and middle-class respectability were concepts cut from the same ideological cloth. Reflecting what Gramsci refers to as "spontaneous consent," respectability was in every way an idea serviceable to the interests of the propertied. As Thompson writes:

\begin{quote}
The respectable workingman became a key mid-Victorian figure, the character on whose good sense hopes of social harmony were based, and whose example of independence and self-respect would inspire a whole class. Hard-working, reliable, reasonably sober, and a dependable family man, he set great store by a regular job, and although by no means obsequious to his masters he had no intention of overthrowing them or of subverting the economic and social system which provided the job.\footnote{Thompson 198.}
\end{quote}

The notion of "respectability" is an ideological construct. The fruits of the Industrial Revolution, powered by the engines of an empire at the peak of its power and influence, produced an English middle class possessed of enormous wealth, and with the extension of the franchise, unprecedented political power. The Reform Bill of 1832 expanded the electorate by 50%, with increased representation for the new urban centers of manufacturing and commerce—all strongholds of the bourgeoisie. In 1832, the new industrial class began a full-fledged partnership with the old ruling aristocracy, laying the groundwork for the socio-political ascendancy of the former and the political neutralization of the latter. As Clive Barker has pointed out, "[t]he class which produces the political and social reform leaders produces the cultural leaders, the playwrights and increasingly the actors and the managers."\footnote{Clive Barker, "A Theatre for the People," \textit{Nineteenth Century British Theatre}, proc. of a symposium sponsored by the Manchester University Department of Drama, 10-12 April, 1970, eds. Kenneth Richards and Peter Thompson (London: Methuen, 1971) 15.} It was in the nineteenth century that the
perpetually-rising middle class reached its critical mass, fostering a struggle for economic, social and cultural supremacy. As the nation became increasingly more middle-class, so did its theatre audiences. Small wonder, then, that the theatre became (although not for the first time in its history) one of many loci for social and political negotiation.

Using Thompson as a basis for understanding the notion of respectability, it can be said that such a notion, as it began to be understood in the 1800s, had something to do with class and something to do with behavior. Respectability was bestowed according to a hierarchy in which those of lower economic estate could attain social recognition in direct correlation to the degree in which they copied their economic betters. Those with the appropriate means could be accorded the mantle of respectability by the degree to which they were perceived as productive, genteel and as properly behaved role models for the rest of society. In effect, respectability embodies all the characteristics requisite for membership in social elite. For the theatre to become viewed as a place for respectable people to congregate, it was imperative for the profession to shake off old associations regarding riotous audiences, rampant prostitution, bohemianism among its practitioners. When Macready embarked upon a campaign in the 1830s and 1840s to rid his theatre of prostitutes, it was a bold attempt to earn respectability. When the ornate theatres of the later century began to offer separate entrances and lounges, segregated by class, it was a continuation of that process. Respectability, difficult as it is to grasp concretely, was nevertheless the most important idea permeating the rhetoric of theatrical legitimation. It was, however, not synonymous. The respectable did not necessarily encompass legitimate, but everything legitimate had to be respectable.

There is, therefore, an intimate connection between legitimation and the dynamics of taste. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has written extensively on the "aristocracy of
culture," the complex sets of relationships and dynamics which come into play in the legitimation of taste. According to Bourdieu,

the effect of the hierarchies of legitimacy (the hierarchy of the arts, of genres, etc.) can be described as a particular case of the 'labelling' effect well known to social psychologists. Just as people see a face differently depending on the ethnic label it is given, so the value of the arts, genres, works and authors depends on the social marks attached to them at any given moment (e.g. place of publication). But the fact remains that the art-lover's sense of cultural investment which leads him always to love what is lovable, and only that, and always sincerely, can be supported by unconscious deciphering of the countless signs which at every moment say what is to be loved and what is not . . . 19

The "labelling" effect to which Bourdieu refers is the outcome of a process by which certain objects and practices become seen as the preserve of a privileged elite, as representations of "high" culture. Bourdieu further states that

the paradox of the imposition of legitimacy is that it makes it impossible to determine whether the dominant feature appears distinguished or noble because it is dominant—i.e. because it has the privilege of defining . . . what is distinguished . . . as being what it is, a privilege which is expressed precisely in its self-assurance—or whether it is only because it is dominant that it appears endowed with those qualities and uniquely qualified to endow them.20

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As theatre historian Loren Kruger interprets Bourdieu, legitimacy is a function of class because "the leisure habits of dominant classes tend to be universalized as taste, art or theatre, while those of subordinate classes or groups are merely entertainment or potentially unruly behavior." 21

Legitimacy, then, is the brass ring in a struggle for social dominance. To speak in terms of "dominance" with regard to the Victorian theatre may seem strange, given the theatre's historically recognized marginalization within nineteenth-century British society and its lowly position in the Victorian art world. 22 But there are hierarchies within hierarchies, and there is evidence that, within the subculture of the Victorian theatre, there was a rhetorical struggle to occupy the topmost tier of the bottom of the cultural heap. Nowhere is this struggle better illustrated than in the testimony given to the parliamentary select committees of 1832 and 1892. It was to these hearings that the principals of nineteenth-century English theatre were called to record for posterity their opinions concerning their profession, and it is this testimony which will serve as an historical framework for the proposed study. Every student of theatre history can recite the litany of reasons given for the so-called decline of the British stage in the early nineteenth century. Late dinner hours, sectarian prejudices, the lack of royal patronage and financial encouragement to authors, all are cited as contributing to the moribund state of the Georgian theatre. Conversely, factors such as the resumption of royal

21 Kruger 10.

22 Michael Baker maintains that the theatre suffered in comparison to other arts in part because early Victorian actors were regarded, not as professionals, but as a sub-class of the proletariat. And unlike painting and music, theatre could only be appreciated away from hearth and home; it was seen as perpetuating a persistently anti-intellectual bias, and, until the 1880s, failed to attract a significant number of competent professional critics. See Baker, The Rise of the Victorian Actor (London: Croom Helm, 1978).
patronage and an influx of better-bred, wealthier audiences, are cited as reasons for late-
century resurgence. Indeed, an examination of the select committee testimony of 1832
and 1892 will confirm that these reasons were widely accepted at the time. The
parliamentary record is a marvelous source of information about the nineteenth-century
British theatre because it offers what few other sources can—a compendium of anecdote
and verbatim conversation about the minutiae of the theatrical profession. But it is also a
slippery source, and for much the same reason. To treat this testimony solely as hard
evidence to be taken at face value is to miss what the transcripts also represent: strategic
volleys in a series of rhetorical power plays by people who had vested interests in shaping
the public perception of the theatre profession. When viewed in such a way, the
transcripts suggest an interesting project: to examine the ways in which theatre was
legitimated through the discourse of respectability, and the ways in which rhetoric was
employed to defined certain types of performance and particular performance venues as
being outside the theatre proper.

Specific Area of the Study

On one level, the testimony of 1832 and 1892 represents a parochial debate waged by
members of a marginalized community, a debate which probably concerned very few
people outside of the profession. But on another level, it represents only one of the
arenas in which the theatre was redefined throughout the nineteenth century. I have
taken the time to examine these papers because the theatre's struggle for legitimacy
would have been meaningless unless it was also carried on in a much larger, more public
sphere—that of the burgeoning periodical press. The widespread nineteenth-century
custom of anonymity among contributing writers makes it very difficult much of the time
to know the identity of periodical contributors. But when authors of theatre-related
articles are identified in nineteenth-century British magazines we find that they are, as
often as not, people of the theatre. Dutton Cook, Henry Irving, Wilkie Collins, William Archer, Henry Morley, Max Beerbohm, George Bernard Shaw, Clement Scott—all put pen to paper in the service of Victorian magazines, magazines which, over the course of the century, devoted hundreds of articles to the significa and insignifica of the theatre. The study examines the periodical press as an Althusserian Ideological State Apparatus, as an organ of theatrical legitimation and a forum for the establishment of identity and the investment of cultural capital. In making this assertion on behalf of the periodical press I will in no way argue for the existence of a cabal or for a systematic agenda on the part of any organized force or dominant class. I argue instead for the existence of a multiplicity of social and economic interests which converge at this particular historical moment. To acknowledge these interests as class-driven is not necessarily to assert a monolithic power. It is also important to bear in mind that, while rhetoric can be used to suppress and oppress, the very existence of such rhetoric implies a strong counterforce. The negative commentary about music hall, examined in Chapter 5, could be considered part of the dominant discourse of the day, appearing as it did in establishment periodicals which catered to the most economically and socially influential classes. But such discourse is almost always reactionary and therefore in a state of perpetual siege. For example, it can be argued that the music hall tradition has had a significantly greater impact on mainstream twentieth-century entertainment than anything produced by the "legitimate" theatre of the nineteenth century, most of which has been forgotten by all but students of the period. The popularity of comedians such as Charlie Chaplin, Benny Hill, Roland Atkinson and many others, all twentieth-century inheritors of the traditions of the nineteenth-century variety stage, would suggest that elitism is not synonymous with dominance.
Impossible as it is to define categorically anything so phenomenological as "class," it is nevertheless undeniable that class becomes more and more a factor in the determination of the "legitimate" as the century matured, and as Chapter II demonstrates, class-based distinctions became paramount during the hearings of 1892, the transcripts of which illustrate how closely the notion of legitimacy was bound up with the all-pervasive nineteenth-century concept of respectability. The struggle for legitimacy was, in essence, a struggle for respectability, a struggle to earn the approval of, and be identified with, Britain's ever-expanding and influential middle classes.

It would seem appropriate, then, to limit the study to those periodicals intended for middle-class readerships. But when the researcher investigates the scope of the Victorian press, he or she must contend with an embarrassment of riches, a multiplicity of publications appealing to a diverse readership which in no way could be characterized as singular. Periodicals, after all, served the interests of workers as well as the bourgeoisie, and the bourgeoisie was a class divisible into subgroups with varying interests and concerns. The essays contained in J. Don Vann and Rosemary T. VanArsdel's Victorian Periodicals and Victorian Society are illustrative of the breadth of the medium's audience. The authors contend that the Victorian periodical not only served a broad cross-section of society, but actually wielded more influence than books.\(^23\) John S. North goes so far as to maintain that Britain's economic and political dominance in the nineteenth century was attributable to "rapid increase in population, the appearance of several generations of people infused with the spirit of search, growth, and prosperity, and the nourishment of these generations by the periodical press, which encouraged the

exchange of new ideas and techniques among the innovators and spread the practical
results among the people." But just who were "the people?" In a study dealing with the
social ramifications of journalism, questions of readership become paramount.

One of the bigger periodical readerships consisted of those people associated with the
professions. At the beginning of the century, the concept of professional pursuit was
essentially confined to the law, the military or the church. By late century,
professionalization was in full bloom, with a variety of organizations and publications
serving individual professional communities, from engineering to medicine. This trend is
reflected by such journals as The Legal Observer (1830-56), Law Magazine and Law
Review (1856-72), Transactions of the Medical Society of London (1810-75),
Ophthalmic Hospital Reports (1857-79), The Engineer (1856-1900), Illustrated Carpenter
and Builder (1877-1900+), United Service Magazine (1842-90), and the Quarterly
Journal of Science (1864-85). The arts, too, proved to be fertile ground for the press.

Leanne Langley writes that Victorian music journals benefited both from the availability
of affordable sheet music as well as increased demand on the part of amateur music-
lovers and music professionals for information on musical topics. Theatre historians
will be familiar with the myriad of publications dedicated exclusively to dramatic art.
Many of them were short-lived, but journals such as the Theatrical Journal and the Era
enjoyed lengthy runs.

24 John S. North, "The Rationale—Why Read Victorian Periodicals?" Victorian
Periodicals: A Guide to Research, eds. J. Don Vann and Rosemary T. VanArsdel (New

25 Leanne Langley, "Music," Victorian Periodicals and Victorian Society, eds. J. Don
Workers' journals were not unheard of, although seldom have they been preserved for posterity. The reading matter of the literate lower classes ranged from chapbooks filled with sensationalized cheap fiction to religious tracts and "improving" literature. As examples of the latter, Edward Royle lists *Chambers' Information for the People*, launched in 1833, and *Cassell's Popular Educator*, begun in 1852.26 "One striking feature of descriptions of the poor by contemporary observers among the higher classes" writes Royle,

is the contrast between laments about the ignorance of the poor and criticism of the low trash which they read. Education was indeed equated with a preference for the improving publications of Charles Knight or John Cassell rather than the degrading rubbish of James Catnach or Edward Lloyd. Behind this value-laden paradox one glimpses a view of the working-class reader, eagerly spelling his or her way through the report of a scandalous murder with the help of a crude wood-cut illustration.27

But in all probability the appeal of such sources of cheap fiction as *Lloyd's Penny Sunday Times* (1840-1850) far outweighed that of the more socially responsible "improving" journals. The difficulty in defining a publication's intended audience is exemplified by G.A. Cranfield's contention that circulation of early century tracts meant for consumption by the lower classes was predominantly "among the middle classes, just as it was those classes that their influence was most pronounced."28

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27 Royle 349.

Much more likely to have been read by actual working-class people were the infamous unstamped papers of the early nineteenth century. Among these was The Poor Man's Guardian, an incendiary Jacobin rag published by the notorious Henry Hetherington. Calls for an end to the monarchy, the banning of priests, and the abolition of private property were common in the Guardian and other illegal publications during the years and months leading up to and following the Reform Bill of 1832 (anathema to the radicals). Hetherington was not alone; in 1833 there were at least seven other illegal papers published in London, all representing, as the Standard reported on the 10th of September, "the first fruits of the late active exertions in behalf of indiscriminate education." Having failed to mute this sedition at its source, the government had resorted in 1832 to the arrest of vendors, evidence that the papers were effective in reaching their intended audience.

In an essay on the working-class press of the northern industrial provinces, Aled Jones recounts the efforts of William Owen (a relative of Utopian Robert Owen) to establish a network of workingmen's newspapers during the late 1860s and 70s. Up until Owen's experiment, workmen's papers had catered either to individual trades (mirroring the trend set by middle-class professional journals) or tended to appeal to London laborers to the exclusion of provincials. Owen set out to establish a series of papers which would not only devote extensive coverage to working people's affairs, but would also give general

29 Quoted in Cranfield 140.
commentary on news events, national and world affairs, and provide serialized fiction and "light relief" material extracted from satirical journals. Far from advocating revolution, Owen's editorial policy embraced defensive working-class self-help backed up by strong trade unionism and collective bargaining.30

The intended readership of the professional journals and that of the working-class and radical press is easy to determine (even if those publications were not always read by the people for whom they were designed) because it was the content of these periodicals which defined their audience. But workers' and professional journals (other than those specifically related to the arts) had very little to say about the theatre. This was a subject embraced by the literary and eclectic press, and it is on these magazines that the study will focus. Still, the question remains--to what extent did the readerships of such diverse eclectic publications as Blackwood's, New Monthly Magazine and Chamber's Edinburgh Journal, all three among the periodicals chosen for this study, have anything in common? To say that they all catered to the middle classes would be accurate, but perhaps not very helpful, given the amorphous definition of "class." At what point does the skilled artisan relinquish his membership in the proletariat and join the ranks of the bourgeoisie? To what extent does the wealthy parvenu share a social bond with the small shopkeeper?

It is not going too far to suggest that the respectable in Victorian society was a determinant of the legitimate, and that the Victorian eclectic press, the literary journals, reviews, and magazines of miscellany, embodied the Weltanschauung of respectability. It is respectability which links such diverse periodicals as Chambers', a magazine

intended for the instruction of the labor elite, and journals such as *Frasier's*, which were aimed at the propertied and the formally educated. Consequently, this study of legitimating strategies can and will turn to these broadly delineated publications. It can also be said that even as the respectable classes were in the process of defining themselves through "respectability," the magazine press, too, was coming into its own as a newly powerful social force. In many ways, the history of the nineteenth-century periodical press is the history of its own self-legitimation. In helping to define the parameters of respectability, the periodical press helped to define the ruling economic and social class and therefore defined an influential role for itself.

Although the press has provided fertile ground for many scholarly studies, it is surprising to note that little work has been done on the relationship between Victorian periodicals and the stage. Recent dissertations abound on such topics as Russian-language magazines in New York City during the late nineteenth century, the depiction of Jews in the late nineteenth-century/early twentieth-century American press, the power of the African-American press to set political agendas, the development of the notion of literary realism in nineteenth-century periodicals, and the history of television criticism. I have uncovered only two Ph.D. dissertations concerned with the pre-

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31 See Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998). Bailey calls the respectable working people the "labour aristocracy," the artisan elites and skilled laborers that composed the "stratum long held to be most susceptible to some form of embourgeoisement" (31).

twentieth-century periodical press and its relationship to British theatre, both of which are quite dated. A. Jackson's 1936 dissertation deals with the early eighteenth-century London theatre and its reception in the press, while A.C. Norenius's 1931 study is limited solely to early-century dramatic criticism and its impact on the drama of the early twentieth century. T.R. Ellis has examined dramatists' contributions to comic journals such as Punch and H.H.L. Wong looks at the late Victorian stage from the perspective of a single, theatre-oriented magazine. J.F. Stottlar's 1966 dissertation focuses on the editorship of Clement Scott during his tenure at the Theatre. There are numerous theses and dissertations dealing with aspects of Victorian theatrical criticism. None, as far as I have been able to determine, has addressed journalistic attitudes toward general theatre practice, or has made it a project to effect a rhetorical analysis in the manner of this study.


Methodology and Organization

The study's conclusions were based on a sample culled from a pool of more than 1300 periodical articles published in over 90 British nineteenth-century eclectic publications. As the Victorian period is essentially an artificial construct—as is any era demarcated by the dates of a monarch's reign—the study is not so phrasical as to exclude articles dated as far back as 1817. The number of articles devoted to theatrical subjects increased, of course, as the century continued (itself a sign of the legitimization process), with the majority of articles dated after 1850. Many of the articles were found through Poole's, the major index for nineteenth-century British and American magazines, and many not included in Poole's were found by simply scanning whole runs of magazines issue by issue.

Initially, the magazines chosen for the study catered to a variety of tastes, and covered wide spectrum of interests. Magazines such as Dickens's *All the Year Round* (1859), *Bentley's Miscellany* (1837), and *English Illustrated Magazine* (1883), were journals of light miscellany and were dedicated mostly to amusement and instruction. Literary periodicals and reviews such as *Blackwood's Magazine* (1817), *Contemporary Review* (1866), *Dublin University Magazine* (1833), *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* (1832), *Fortnightly Review* (1865), *Saturday Review* (1856) and *Nineteenth Century* (1877) reflected a tone of intellectual substance, and were influential instruments in the formation of public opinion.37 Magazines such as *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal* and *Penny Magazine* (both 1832) fancied themselves as educational resources for the

deserving laborer. Still others focused on issues pertaining to a particular pastime or interest such as *Antiquary* (1880), *Art Journal* (1839), *Journal of the Statistical Society* (1839), and, of course, the *Theatre* (1877). Yet another category of publication is the sectarian magazine, published as an organ of organized religion, of which the *Christian Observer* (1802), *Christian Remembrancer* (1819), *Congregational Magazine* (1818), and *Congregationalist* (1872) are exemplars.

As the study progressed it became clear that the number of magazines sampled had to be narrowed. The volume of articles found in periodical indexes was too large to incorporate in a rhetorical study, and so the problem of what to exclude had to be addressed. Literary journals were problematic, as their view of the theatre naturally tended to be geared toward the closet drama, and was relatively unconcerned with actual practice. Indeed, the volume of articles on dramatic literature is large enough to warrant a separate study of that topic alone. As it was, literary periodicals were largely used in this study as background material. Professional magazines rarely included theatrical topics and catered to such narrow readerships that they were excluded from the study, and magazines catering solely to theatrical interests were excluded in as much as they have been examined to some degree by theatre scholars and, being in a sense fan magazines, were oriented too narrowly as well.

The magazines which were chosen had the broadest possible readerships within the wide band of readers considered middle-class; they were magazines that were influential, not necessarily within the narrow community of the power elite or the intelligentsia, but among the housewives, the schoolteachers, the moderately educated, the respectable workmen and tradesmen. The magazines chosen for the study were not
single-issue periodicals, nor were they devoted to a particular profession, although many undoubtedly served as light reading for the professional class. Eclectic in nature, they produced articles of short to moderate length, never delving too deeply into any one topic and always catering to the broadest possible readership.

Since the parliamentary hearings of 1832 and 1892 consisted of pages of testimony concerning the crucial theatrical issues at the beginning and the end of the century, Chapter II uses these governmental papers as an historical framework, as a pair of rhetorical bookends, so to speak, from which to launch a discussion of the wider national conversation concerning the nature of legitimacy and respectability which took place in the eclectic press during the intervening years. A chapter devoted to each and every issue presented by the parliamentary papers and reflected in the periodical press, however, would have been impractical, but each of the three succeeding chapters pertaining to the rhetorical analysis of periodical literature deals with a particular broad aspect of the national conversation with many smaller subtopics subsumed within. Chapter 3 looks at the extent to which the press defended the stage from anti-theatrical prejudice, and held up the stage as a useful and beneficial art form even in the early part of the century when scholars such as Jonas Barrish have shown such prejudice was at its peak within circles influential within Georgian and Victorian society. Censorship, in particular, is examined and the ways in which the "respectable" public became defined through its ability to regulate itself against potential improprieties on the stage.

Chapter 4 examines the image of the Victorian actor and the ways in which Victorian periodicals bolstered that image while at the same time struggling with contradictions engendered by residual antitheatrical bias. Actresses were legitimated as home-centered and domestically inclined paragons of virtue, and actors as industrious and hard-working, even as the craft of acting was given serious consideration as a profession.
It is important to remember that the process of self-definition on the part of the respectable elite was one of exclusion as much as inclusion. In Chapter 5, the study examines the ways in which the press defined the "other" and the "not respectable."

Using the notion of "rational recreation" as a framework, this chapter explores the ways in which music hall, working-class theatre and its audiences were both defended and maligned by periodical writers. Working-class theatre and music hall were often condemned as degraded forms of entertainment catering to audiences which were at best guilty of polluting aesthetic standards, and at worst dangerous and subversive representatives of the urban residuum that had to be contained physically and rhetorically. Chapter 6 concludes with a reflection on the study's findings and some suggestions for future research in the area.
At the heart of many, if not most, of the issues confronting the British theatrical community during the Victorian period lies the question of legitimacy, of which artists and what particular types of performance could lay claim to the mantle of the theatre proper. Great Britain's historical penchant for regulating theatrical entertainment culminated had its nineteenth-century culmination in a series of parliamentary hearings (1832, 1866 and 1892) on the legal rights of and limitations on theatres and music halls. Prior to the nullification of the patents in 1843, the key legal issues concerned the rights of the legitimate patent theatres, Covent Garden, Drury Lane and the specially licensed Haymarket Theatre, and how, if at all, to protect them against incursions by the minor theatres which, by law if not in practice, were prevented from legally producing the regular drama. By 1866 and again in 1892, the rights of the patents were not an issue, but the established theatres of the West End, many of which had come into existence after 1843, were run by managers considerably less interested in free trade than the minor theatre managers of 1832. These former upstarts were now the Establishment, and it was music hall which threatened them economically (or so they saw it), just as the minor theatres had once threatened the patent houses. The question of legitimacy, then, remained paramount throughout the century. Legitimacy bestowed cultural capital, and cultural capital meant respectability and the patronage of the "respectable" classes. The
The following analysis is an examination of the testimony of the first and final nineteenth-century parliamentary hearings on the stage, offered as a pair of rhetorical bookends. Such a framework provides a basis for understanding the ways in which the press restated and disseminated, for broader public consumption, many of the very same issues and arguments presented for the two select committees.

The focus of the 1832 hearings would, at first glance, seem to be very different from that of 1892. The earlier inquiry was principally devoted to the question of patent theatre rights and the alleged infringement of those rights by minor theatres. In 1892, the primary concern was split between a debate over which authorities should have oversight in enforcing fire safety standards, the regulation of licensing, and arguments for and against granting music halls a wider berth in producing sketches and short plays. Nevertheless, despite these differences, in both instances we have an entrenched establishment fighting against an incursion of upstarts. If we assume these documents to be systematic and objective chronicles, we will find they are poor sources. Again, it is important to remember that the hearings should not be treated as objective historical sources, but as case studies in rhetorical strategy. Like much of what was written about the theatre in the eclectic press, the arguments being made are of two kinds. On one level, there are consciously articulated positions—on free trade, the definition of sketches, the proper role of the Lord Chamberlain in licensing theatres or music halls, the efficacy of expanding the numbers of theatres in light of a supposed shortage of talent, etc. On yet another and more fascinating level, are the ideological assumptions which permeate those positions—assumptions about class, gender, economics, etc.—and which served to cement and re-inforce certain ideological constructs as being "natural" and self-evident.

"[C]ulture," wrote Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*, "begets a dissatisfaction which is of the highest possible value in stemming the common tide of men's thoughts in
a wealthy and industrial community, and which saves the future, as one may hope, from being vulgarised, even if it cannot save the present." ¹ Arnold's notion of culture as a purifying force with a "single-minded love of perfection, its desire simply to make reason and the will of God prevail," ² is the foundation of nineteenth-century cultural elitism. Published in book form in 1869, Arnold's treatise post-dates the 1832 hearings by several decades, but even so, many of his assumptions permeated the debate over theatrical legitimacy. Legitimacy, for witnesses such as Collier, implied not merely an aesthetic, but a moral dimension as well. "[w]hen I speak of legitimate drama," he told the committee, "I do not mean legitimate in point of antiquity, for then the grossest absurdities may be brought in . . . ." Wycherley, for instance, was considered technically legitimate, "but it would not be an allowed drama, on account of its immorality: the taste of the public would, I think, prevent its being acted with success." ³ Clearly, Collier alludes to a public taste no longer receptive to supposed vulgarities which, in times past, were a matter of course. Implied here is a new kind of audience, one which would presumably supplant another, historically less morally refined, group of playgoers.

Not only did Collier's position reflect a moral concern for the improving aspects of the theatre, but it also reflected a shift in the tradition of anti-theatrical prejudice, a shift in emphasis from the moral effects of the theatrical event on audiences and participants to the moral effects of the audience on the theatre. Jonas Barish has commented on the notion, prevalent in some quarters throughout the century (and from time out of mind), that dramatic representation had adverse effects on the character of both spectator and

¹ Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy (1869; Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971) 41.

² Arnold 47.

participant. In one example he cites the pervasive anti-theatrical anxiety in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) a novel in which the private home theatricals of the Bertram family are seen as "charged with a mysterious iniquity that challenges explanation." In a discussion of Charles Kingsley's anti-mimetic diatribe, *Plays and Puritans*, Barish comments on the view of theatre as

> the most volatile of the arts, the most telling in its impact, the most provocative of mass emotion, as well as the most productive of visible disorder in the lives of its practitioners, who must move in a perpetual glare of artificial light and public curiosity . . .

But Collier's prejudice only partly addressed the potentially harmful properties of the drama. Implied here is a criticism of a certain kind of audience—the kind of audience which, because of its social and moral inadequacy, drags down the theatre to its own disreputable level. Room must be made for the new audience, the new and respectable playgoer who will not riot in the pit, but applaud politely from the stalls. The truly legitimate drama fosters a dialectic between audiences and plays, plays which reflect the highest standards of refinement and morality. The best audiences tolerate nothing less.

The testimony of Winston and Collier provides an important insight into the public perception of English theatre in the early nineteenth century. As an art, it was ill-defined, a discipline which almost seemed to be in the process of defining itself. Sheridan and Shakespeare alternated at the patent theatres with harlequinades, extravaganzas, and burlesques. The early part of the century saw the popularity of equestrian drama at Astley's, aquatic drama at Sadler's Wells, the pantomime of Grimaldi, canine spectacle at the Royal Circus, and all forms of melodrama and redacted Shakespeare performed in

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5 Barish 319.
various urban penny theatres. The lessees and managers of the patents had strong economic incentives to perpetuate a distinction between their offerings and those of the minor theatres; they had good reason to believe that competition from the minors was largely responsible for the dismal state of their ledger books. But the debate over the nature of illegitimate and legitimate drama, as exemplified in the hearings of 1832, also reflects an anxious desire to preserve for the theatre an aura of "high" culture, a sacred precinct separate and distinct from supposed lower orders of entertainment. Even Winston's latitudinarian sensibility had its limits—lions, after all, were beyond the pale.

Such a desire to differentiate was, no doubt, brought about by feelings of insecurity and a nagging suspicion that the theatre perhaps really was an inferior art form. The assumption that the state of dramatic literature was in freefall permeates the testimony. Examiner of Plays George Colman felt that, despite a growing number of theatres, "the general taste for play-going . . . [was] evidently on the wane," and, if minor theatres continued to proliferate, dramatic literature would "go to the dogs along with the rest." Inferior venues make for inferior entertainment, a sentiment shared by playwright T.J. Serle, who attributed the decline of drama to "its separation from the literature of the country." Large theatres, he said, were the greatest impediment to the enjoyment of the "the language of a play," and the result had been an unfortunate tendency to emphasize

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7 "No manager," writes Watson, "from 1826 to the freeing of the theatres, made the monopoly theatres pay, and what money was gained seems to have come rather from the circus part of the program than from the legitimate drama" (47).

8 Select Committee 1832; 67 q.1010.

9 Select Committee 1832; 70 q.1052.
spectacle over poetry.¹⁰ For Serle, audiences had no choice but to submit to such conditions because they could not hear properly in the larger theatres. But actor T.P. Cooke, the famous star of nautical melodrama, was inclined to blame the public for its lack of interest in the legitimate drama, noting that "those with regular licences have not been very successful lately." Melodrama, said Cooke, was overwhelmingly preferred over Shakespeare and Sheridan.¹¹ In this view, debased forms of popular culture (which, in any event, had put a considerable amount of money in Cooke's pocket) could be blamed for the lack of fine literature for the stage. In 1832, it was the literary quality of the drama which reflected its cultural capital.

All of which meant that anything privileging the visual was suspect as a candidate for high art. G.B. Davidge, the proprietor of the Coburg, felt that the theatre was not so fashionable as it had been 40 years before,¹² and that "the degraded state of the drama" was in part due to lack of interest in literary fare. "I conceive," he said, "if the managers of the patent theatres could have obtained full houses by such performances as John Bull, and what we call generally coat-and-waistcoat comedies, they never would have had recourse to spectacle."¹³

Davidge was not the only witness so inclined. Playwright Douglas Jerrold saw legitimate drama as that in which "the interest of the piece is mental; where the situation of the piece is rather mental than physical."¹⁴ Theatre patron Edmund Swifte's testimony

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¹⁰ Select Committee 1832; 118 q. 2082.

¹¹ Select Committee 1832; 148 q. 2637.

¹² Select Committee 1832; 83 q. 1360.

¹³ Select Committee 1832; 84 q. 1363. Curiously, Davidge seemingly reversed himself a few questions later when asked if the legitimate drama was as popular at the Coburg as the illegitimate. "Quite," he replied, "or more so" (84 q. 1370).

¹⁴ Select Committee 1832; 158 q. 2843.
could not reconcile his obvious prejudice against spectacle with the realities of the market. "[E]very exhibition of the regular drama, or any exhibition at all approaching to the performance of the regular drama," he said, "has been more felt and more liked by the audience than any mere spectacle or buffoonery has been, and from thence I infer that there is among us a great regard for the national drama . . . ."¹⁵

But the public's preferences were not that clear cut. As Swiftæ soon admitted, Shakespeare drew well in smaller theatres only if "the stage had the capacity of exhibiting pieces that have great decorations incidental to them, such as Julius Caesar, the Tempest, and others . . . ."¹⁶ Here we have a seeming paradox: the public only reluctantly tolerates spectacle, yet at the same time makes spectacle a necessary precondition for the enjoyment of Shakespeare. John Kemble, too, saw "splendour" as one of the least significant aspects of production. He argued that pantomime and other visually oriented entertainments were actually better suited for smaller stages, the implication being that the minor houses should not aspire to anything else.¹⁷ In making this argument, he attempted to distance his own work from such supposedly frivolous entertainments, claiming that melodramas such as Sheridan Knowles' The Hunchback (which had been very well-received at Covent Garden) was not in the least dependent on "splendour" for its success. "I should say," Kemble asserted, "the most successful melo-

¹⁵ Select Committee 1832; 163-164 q. 2942.
¹⁶ Select Committee 1832; 164 q. 2944.
¹⁷ Maintaining that the "regular drama can only be adequately represented in a theatre of certain dimensions," Kemble added that he did "not think any of our minor theatres could adequately represent the regular drama as they now stand." See Select Committee 1832; 45 q. 607.
dramas have been those which depended on strong excitement in the story or incidents of the piece, for without these all the splendour in the world will do nothing either in a large or in a small theatre. Splendour alone does nothing, or next to nothing, to the success of a piece." 18

So for Kemble, audiences were naturally inclined to favor the literary qualities of plays over the more superficial aspects of production. But audiences were not completely blameless in bringing about the qualitative crisis, and here, again, is a contradiction in the perceptions of many witnesses. Collier, who had earlier maintained that the natural gentility of the theatre-going public was a preventive against indecency (see above), simultaneously held that audiences of bad character were instrumental in keeping people of good quality away from the theatre:

320. Would you not say that the prejudice on the part of the public to the immoral tendency of theatres, is in a great degree owing to the gross immorality seen in the larger theatres?—In the audience part of it, you mean?

321. Yes?—I think it is in a great degree; and I think it is a most decided objection to any man carrying his wife or sister to the theatre, when he is compelled to take them through a crowd of women of notoriously bad character. 19

Collier places the onus for bad audience behavior and moral turpitude squarely on the women, although, presumably, these women would not have been in attendance unless they were assured of a surplus of male customers. In any case, these were the undesirables who kept the new, respectable classes away from the drama, preventing it from reaching its full potential as an art form. In this way Collier reconciles his

18 Select Committee 1832; 44 q. 603.
19 Select Committee 1832; 27.
seemingly contradictory assertion that the public taste is a detriment to the theatre, but that it also ran in favor of the legitimate (read "superior") drama. Collier actually refers to two publics here, one debased and one which exists only as an ideal.

Others, too, shared Collier's suspicions about the theatre-going public. Theatres, said Bow-street magistrate G.R. Minshull, were breeding grounds for pickpockets and other criminals. John Kemble, who at the time of his testimony controlled one of the patent theatres, felt that an increase in the number of dramatic houses would lead to increasing disrespect for the profession. Kemble offered that there were "a great number of idle persons always about a theatre, and the more you increase them the more you destroy the respectability of the profession. Kemble's sincerity on this point is questionable since his economic interests were, by his own admission, threatened by competition. Still, the same tortured logic concerning the character and refinement of audiences and theatre habitués prevailed in his testimony just as it did in Collier's. Theatres attracted unsavory characters, but at the same time, members of the public, as Kemble asserted in a discussion about the efficacy of censorship, were "perhaps better guardians of their own moral and religious sentiments than anybody can be for them."

The contradiction becomes less puzzling when we consider that, despite conventional wisdom suggesting an early nineteenth-century audience monolithic in its social composition, the late Georgian theatre actually catered to a much more socially

20 At one point, Collier refers to the "bad habits" contracted by performers when "acting to worse audiences" (Select Committee 1832; 33 q. 394). Earlier, he had maintained that "[t]here is a desire, as far as my experience goes, on the part of the public for more theatres at which the legitimate drama may be represented properly" (27 q. 325).

21 Select Committee 1832; 188 q. 3375.

22 Select Committee; 1832 47 q. 643.

23 Select Committee; 1832 51 q. 708.
diverse group. Even as early as the Old Price Riots, there is ample evidence of patronage by the respectable classes, and there are a few references to audience demographics in the 1832 testimony which would support such a view. For George Colman, a great part of the audience was not comprised of rowdy proles, but rather tourists and foreigners. David Morris, the proprietor of the Haymarket, admitted that minor theatres such as the Coburg sometimes drew "persons of good condition," but that attendance by such persons was far from consistent. The need to attract more of these respectable types was apparent, but when asked if the Haymarket would consider

24 The Old Price Riots refer to a series of disturbances at Covent Garden lasting 61 nights beginning on September 18, 1809. After the theatre burned to the ground in 1808, actor manager John Kemble, part holder of Covent Garden's patent was forced to raise £150,000 for the completion of a new theatre. Generous gifts from such patrons as the Duke of Northumberland and the Prince of Wales offset these costs by some £50,000, but the balance was raised by selling shares at £500 each. Kemble, feeling justified by the expenses, raised the prices of the boxes from six to seven shillings and the pit from three-and-sixpence to four shillings. On September 18, Kemble stepped forward to give an opening address and was greeted by hisses, catcalls and cries of "old prices!" from the disgruntled audience. For 61 nights patrons disrupted performances by parading around the house wearing hats and medals with the letters "O.P." on them and drowning out the actors with shouts and catcalls. Kemble eventually capitulated, lowered the prices in the pit and boxes and did away with a third tier of private boxes he had intended to let at a considerable sum.

25 Marc Baer, Theatre and Disorder in Late Georgian London (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 135-165. In a chapter titled "Who Were the OPs?" Baer examines diary entries, arrest records and newspaper accounts in order to show that the rioters were composed of "skilled workers, tradesmen, and the very respectable, which confounds the anecdotal evidence pointing to a simple image of the Covent Garden crowd (142)." Baer also points out that a quarter of those arrestees who identified themselves before the magistrate as "gentlemen" were arrested in the pit, challenging "the simple determinism of contemporaries, reiterated by later students, that seating in theatres perfectly reflected the social divisions of Georgian society" (143).

26 Select Committee 1832; 70 q. 1058.

27 Select Committee 1832; 138 q. 2441-42.
adjusting performance times to accommodate the fashionable crowd, Morris hedged. It would be, he said, "injurious" and even "dangerous," to antagonize the gallery gods so recklessly.\(^28\) There were box receipts to be gotten at the Coburg, said Cooke, but they were "very slight indeed, compared with the pit and gallery."\(^29\) Swifte concurred, saying that minor theatres attracted mostly lower-middle class patrons.\(^30\) The preponderance of this anecdotal testimony would suggest that, even though a large segment of the respectable classes did indeed stay away from the theatre in the early part of the century, they did not do so completely. Nevertheless, it also suggests a perception on the part of managers and other theatre professionals that their art was held hostage by the tastes of the mob.

By the mob and by a host of other fortuitous economic circumstances. One curious argument against allowing minor theatres to produce regular drama was that the market did not provide for enough good actors to sustain an increase in the number of productions. William Dunn, the treasurer and secretary for Drury Lane, flatly denied that there were enough talented actors to meet the needs of more than two companies.\(^31\) William Macready argued that ending the monopoly would entail breaking up the established companies, as the minor theatres would lure the limited supply of competent actors from the majors.\(^32\) Kemble agreed, saying that freedom for minor theatres would lead to a diminishment of public taste as mediocre actors began to fill smaller, inferior

\(^{28}\) Select Committee 1832; 141 q. 2502-03.

\(^{29}\) Select Committee 1832; 146 q. 2609.

\(^{30}\) Select Committee 1832; 163 q. 2942.

\(^{31}\) Select Committee 1832; 38 q. 492.

\(^{32}\) Select Committee 1832; 132 q. 2342.
Cooke managed to blame the perceived shortage of talent on the illegitimate drama itself, saying that the provincial theatres, the traditional training ground for the profession, had turned to melodrama and away from the regular drama, to the detriment of actor training. Charles Mathews, a minor theatre proprietor himself, made it clear that only an elite cadre of performers was qualified to act the legitimate drama at all. To allow inferior minor theatre actors to play Shakespeare, said Mathews, "would bring disrepute on the stage generally." Even Mathews, who largely made his fortune playing the illegitimate drama, felt compelled to draw such qualitative distinctions between the high art of the regular drama and its lowbrow counterpart. The actor shortage thus became a convenient excuse to maintain the status quo.

If there were indeed too few actors worthy of their profession, the shortage was complemented by a perceived lack of dramaturgical talent. It was certainly true that there was little to encourage an author to write for the stage. No copyright law existed to protect playwrights, and once his or her play was published, it became fair game for anyone to use free of charge. Even before publication, their texts were frequently

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33 Select Committee 1832; 45 q. 610-14.

34 Select Committee 1832; 148 q. 2633.

35 Select Committee 1832; 166 q. 2979-80.

36 One of the few witnesses to take a contrary view was actor William Elton. According to Elton, there were plenty of qualified actors in the provinces who couldn't even get an audition at one of the major theatres. If Elton's testimony was more than a self-serving statement (he was himself a provincial actor) it might indicate that the actor shortage was more invention on the part of the theatre establishment than an honest perception. See Select Committee 1832; 232 q. 4148.

37 A circumstance lamented by Macready, who thought it "very hard that the author should not derive benefit from the acting of [his own work] even after it has been published" Select Committee 1832; 136 q. 2404.
pirated by unscrupulous managers. This was, in the opinion of more than a few witnesses, one of the chief causes for the drama's decline. Serle, the author of The Merchant of London, was generally satisfied with the fees paid to playwrights for commissioned works, but found the opportunities too few and the turn-around time for approval by literary managers too long. Haymarket proprietor David Morris intimated that his theatre was having difficulty competing for plays because Drury Lane and Covent Garden could afford to pay large sums to entice what few talented authors there were. Morris was less sympathetic than Serle or even Macready to the plight of the playwrights, holding that they were much better compensated than their counterparts a generation earlier, but even so, his complaint reflected a concern with a perceived shortage: the small pool of acceptable authors drove up lump sum payments to an unacceptably high level. Playwright Douglas Jerrold maintained that "the intellect of the country" was excluded from the stage; accordingly he advocated abolition of the monopoly as a cure.

Such a drastic solution was the last thing the major theatre managers wanted, of course. They saw the situation almost purely in terms of zero sum game economics, as though their market was fixed and as though any success on the part of minor theatres was money taken directly out of their pockets. The major proprietors insisted that they were running deficits, although it seems difficult to accept that they had become completely pauperized by their profession. The debate over the monopoly could not, however, be characterized as one in which minor managers unreservedly championed

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38 Select Committee 1832; 118 q. 2073.
39 Select Committee 1832; 152 q. 2710.
40 Select Committee 1832; 150 q. 2686.
41 Select Committee 1832; 158 q 2831.
the cause of free trade. G.B. Davidge of the Coburg, for example, was looking, not so much for open competition for everyone, but for a secure place on the gravy train of protectionism. He favored equal footing for the existing minor theatres, but added that he did "not think the greater number of theatres there are the more beneficial to those possessing them; [but rather advocated] . . . a moderate number of theatres without further competition." Among the major theatre proprietors, Covent Garden's John Forbes was willing to contemplate the abolition of monopoly as long as the minor theatres would be compelled to pay the majors compensation for the right to produce legitimate drama, a solution he compared to the custom by which the citizens of London compacted with the Duke of Bedford for the use of his estate. Forbes initially denied that his theatre was in poor financial health, but later admitted that his shareholders hadn't been paid any of their principal and, at times, had not received accrued interest. Like the Duke's estate, the market was finite; there was, he reasoned, only so much money to be spent on amusement, and the greater the number of theatres, the less profit for all concerned. His testimony is indicative of the zero sum mentality.

42 This is in accordance with Baker's observation that the legislation of 1843 was not really about free trade at all, but was instead "solidly protectionist in spirit . . . ." He goes on to note that "[w]hat the 'free traders' of the 1830s wanted, by contrast with their counterparts of the 1860s, was the continuance of restrictive practice in which they too had a share" (140-141).

43 Select Committee 1832; 83 q. 1345.

44 Select Committee 1832; 100 q. 1715.

45 Select Committee 1832; 101 q. 1740-41.

46 Select Committee 1832; 102 q. 1777.

47 Select Committee 1832; 103 q. 1785.
Xenophobia, too, was a factor in this economic insecurity. Perhaps this is an overly strong term to describe the anxiety over things foreign, but Morris did reserve special scorn for Covent Garden and Drury Lane's sponsorship of French and Italian opera, an infringement which he claimed was "prejudicial to the interests of the Haymarket, and most severely felt in its receipts." 48 And when Charles Mathews was asked to "account for the ruin which has occurred to the great theatres," he replied that "the Italian Opera has done more mischief to the drama than any falling off of the taste for it." Fashionable types, he said, were lured to the opera because it was de rigueur. "I look upon the encouragement of the Italian Opera and French acting, which is now given," said Mathews, "to be one of the greatest causes of the decline of drama." 49

And so there was indeed a sense that things were falling apart, that the theatre was at some sort of juncture and that its future was far from certain. Small wonder, then, that the practitioners of such a humble and ill-regarded art form should strive for whatever aura of legitimacy they could muster. So, also, was there a sense that if the theatre were to be legitimated, it would have to be at the expense of lesser, inferior entertainments. And so the debate over generic legitimacy becomes a political struggle in which the players not only define themselves, but their competitors as well. I would suggest that this is why Kemble drew a distinction between "spurious entertainments" and legitimate theatre, albeit without giving any solid criteria with which to base such distinctions. 50 It explains the compulsion that John Forbes felt in giving the rather unrigorous and dismissive definition of burletta as a "joking, laughing, musical thing." 51

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48 Select Committee 1832; 137 q. 2414.
49 Select Committee 1832; 169 q. 3026.
50 Select Committee 1832; 46 q. 626.
51 Select Committee 1832; 108 q. 1900.
took another tack, defining the legitimate as encompassing all the plays of Shakespeare, all classical plays, and all plays licensed by the Lord Chamberlain.\textsuperscript{52} Since the Lord Chamberlain licensed all plays, this definition made the legal operation of a minor theatre a literal impossibility. Other witnesses were more subtle, with playwright Jerrold holding that legitimate drama was a question of intellectual substance. It was, he stated, a question of whether the "interest of the piece was mental, rather than physical."\textsuperscript{53} Covent Garden stage manager George Bartley spoke of "settled drama," to differentiate the plays of such authors as Otway, Sheridan and Shakespeare from the inferior melodrama offered by provincial theatres.\textsuperscript{54} Playwright John Poole used a telling phrase, intimating that plays with music (perhaps of the kind he himself was inclined to write) could be legitimate so long as "nature were [sic] not outraged in any way... ."\textsuperscript{55} His implication was clear: the true practitioners of art were in harmony with nature; those who would bastardize the received forms were not.

By the 1890s, a curious and significant shift occurs in this discourse of legitimation, an illustration of which can be found by contrasting the Select Committee transcripts of 1892 to 1832. In 1892 Parliament was once again called to investigate the laws pertaining to theatrical licensing.\textsuperscript{56} Among the many issues discussed were the efficacy of censorship and the wisdom of allowing music halls to present short dramatic sketches—which, at the time, were considered illegal infringements on the rights of theatre

\textsuperscript{52} Select Committee 1832; 138 q. 2450.

\textsuperscript{53} Select Committee 1832; 158 q. 2843.

\textsuperscript{54} Select Committee 1832; 181-82 q. 3257.

\textsuperscript{55} Select Committee 1832; 193 q. 3455.

\textsuperscript{56} An intermediate set of hearings had also been held in 1866.
managers. In these hearings, William Archer, a vociferous advocate for the abolition of the censor, argued for the freedom of the music hall managers, in part because it would foster

a new cleavage . . . between the theatres and music halls, that certain forms of entertainment which are now given at theatres would then be given at places where they smoke, such as burlesque and all the rough and tumble forms of farce (quite harmless), and much melodrama. I see no reason why one should not smoke and drink at a melodrama; it might very often be pleasant; and the higher forms of drama, which would certainly be injured in their effect by an audience's attention being distracted by even smoking or by the bringing round [sic] of refreshments, and so on, would remain upon their present status. 57

The "cleavage" to which Archer refers would not be new, but merely wider and deeper as some of the less desirable entertainments deserted the theatres in favor of the working-class venues. 58 This division would leave the legitimate theatre in the possession of the "higher" drama. These more refined people, he claimed, would still patronize those theatres — such as the Lyceum or the Haymarket — where the "serious" drama was presented. "And furthermore, he concluded, "I think that the higher drama could only gain by the admission that the lower drama, burlesque, the low-class farce, and so on,


58 That they were indeed predominantly working-class is a notion supported by the work of Peter Bailey, who notes that, despite attempts by some of the larger caterers of the 1860s to woo a higher class of audience, those members of the middle class who did patronize the halls largely did so due to a predilection for slumming. Bailey quotes a Times article of the early 1880s which "remarked that no gentleman would wish to patronise the music halls by choice." See Bailey, Leisure and Class in Victorian England (London: Routledge, 1978) 155. See also the testimony of Matthew Hanly, a representative of the London United Workmen's Committee, who defended the illegal sketches as being morally "conducive to the best interests of the industrial classes who are the principal frequenters of music halls." See Select Committee 1892; 327 q. 5171.
was a different order of dramatic composition, and that the music hall theatre, as it were, was not on the same intellectual and artistic plane as the higher theatres. Two days later, on May 18, the proprietor of the Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh, a Mr. James Brown Howard, made clear (while voicing his opposition to dramatic sketches in music halls) just what class of person he thought would favor the proposed amendment of the law. Such an amendment, he said, would result in drawing "a considerable number of the playgoers perhaps from the pit and gallery of the theatre to the music hall."

The question arises as to what theatres Brown referred. Archer had implied a distinction between the tastes of the music hall audiences and those of the "serious" houses. But if this were so, it would have run contrary to Howard's fear of a mass exodus from those theatres. The confusion dissipates when we realize that there was yet another gradation of theatrical venue situated somewhere between the "serious" theatre and the music hall—that represented by the minor theatre, in London the transpontine or East End theatre. These were the theatres which had the most to lose if the music halls were to be given their freedom. The Lyceum and Haymarket crowd could not be enticed by the frivolous and vulgar vaudevilles of the Pavilion at Whitechapel. It would be, as drama critic Joseph Carr predicted, "certain theatres in the East End of the town [that] would suffer; . . . the West End theatres would undergo no change at all." William Bailey, a twenty-five year veteran of the stage, and a music hall manager himself, generously

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59 Select Committee 1892; 262 q. 3999.

60 Select Committee 1892; 276 q. 4305.

61 Select Committee 1892; 324 q. 5138.
suggested that theatres should be free to allow smoking in the auditorium as compensation for granting music halls wider latitude in programming. In doing so, he referred to the class-based segregation of late nineteenth-century London audiences. "Let us have a distinction," he told the committee,

it is the minor theatres who say that the music halls are injuring them; let the minor theatres have the pipe. People like Mr. Henry Irving do not want the pipe, and his audience would not go for it; but the audience at the Britannia and the Surrey would think it a great boon; and I say let them have it. 62

I mention the testimony of Messrs. Archer, Howard, Carr and Bailey in order to point out that the concern of the witnesses in defining a legitimate space for the drama was as palpable in 1892 as it was in 1832. But in 1832 the criteria for theatrical legitimacy was based on generic considerations (burletta and lions vs. Shakespeare and Sheridan) or, in Winston's case, the actual venue of the entertainment (Covent Garden and Drury Lane vs. Astley's). In one sense, this criteria remained constant in 1892, with Irving's West End repertoire of Shakespeare and spectacle-oriented, romantic dramas clearly within approved parameters and Bailey's music hall vaudevilles clearly outside. But I would argue that the distinctions made between the transpontine minor theatres and music halls and the West End houses were much more focused on class than were the distinctions made between the patents and the minor houses in 1832. In 1892, the taxonomy of the legitimate becomes less reliant on entertainment type and more a function of the social and economic status of audiences, audiences much more rigidly segregated by class than those of 60 years earlier. The Lyceum and the Strand are "major" (read "legitimate") theatres, not simply because of what they offer, but also because of whom they serve. By 1892, Collier's notion of a legitimating class of theatrical arbiters was a reality.

62 Select Committee 1892; 304 q. 4717.
Yet, even bearing in mind this increased emphasis on class, it is also striking that, sixty years after the first hearings, the theatre community is essentially involved in a struggle for legitimation. The landscape was different, music halls having been added to the equation along with many more theatres competing in a free and open market. But the rhetorical battle continued as "respectable" theatre owners jockeyed to position themselves as the standard bearers of "high" art in contrast to the lesser efforts of their competitors in music hall and working-class theatre. A closer examination of the 1892 hearings will illustrate the strategies employed by the principal witnesses.

Another big contrast with the hearings of 1832 was that the anxiety and self-doubt about the theatrical profession and the state of the drama had given way to an almost arrogant consensus that the drama had vastly improved in the intervening decades. It was a necessary assumption: the managers could not portray themselves as members of an elite class if they had spoken as disparagingly of their art form as did the witnesses in 1832. If theatre were to occupy a place in the pantheon of high culture, it would have to be rehabilitated and talk of the drama's decline replaced by talk of its ascendancy.

Mostly this was accomplished through inference—to say that music hall audiences would degrade the drama is to imply that the drama occupies a lofty perch, or at least one loftier than that claimed by the variety stage. Irving came right out and declared the drama to be superior and to have recovered a position formerly lost. "Many earnest men have laboured," he said,

and not unsuccessfully, to raise the arts of the drama and the stage . . . .

The old disadvantages and methods of ill [sic], based on the customs of the time, have been gradually done away with, and the theatre certainly is now, as a rule, looked on as a clean and wholesome place of amusement, where much good, educational and moral, may be gained.63

63 Select Committee 1892; 63 q 973.
One committee member called the plays mounted by John Hare "a manifest improvement over the class of plays played before," to which Hare replied with a statement affirming the overall "improvement in the art." 64

Music hall, too, was seen to have been greatly improved upon in recent years, with a number of witnesses expressing the opinion that there had been great strides made toward increasing the moral tone of the entertainment and in attracting a better-behaved audience. Mr. Thomas George Fardell, a member of the London County Council and one-time chairman of that body's theatres and music halls committee, recalled with distaste "the early days of the reign of Her present Majesty," admitting that he had once visited a disreputable night spot known as "the Coal Hole," an establishment he described as "not very elevating." The character of entertainment, he went on to say, had markedly improved since that time, a development he attributed to an increasingly more educated public. 65 And Alexander C. Bruce, Assistant Commissioner of Metropolitan Police, testified that music halls were "well-conducted," and that there had been an improvement "in the character of the management" in the last few years. 66 When asked what effect music halls "in the inferior parts of the town have had upon the conduct of the people," Bruce implied that the public houses were wonderful tools for the control of social inferiors, saying that "a well-conducted music hall is a great benefit." 67 It seems that music hall was, in some ways, viewed as an opiate for the masses.

The notion of inexorable progress in all things is quintessentially Victorian, so it is no surprise that these particular late Victorians saw themselves as the culmination of some

64 Select Committee 1892; 220 q. 3354.

65 Select Committee 1892; 25 q. 286-291.

66 Select Committee 1892; 267 q. 4122-23.

67 Select Committee 1892; 269 q. 4161.
great process of improvement. When it came to amusements, these witnesses implied the moral superiority of their own time in contrast to a darker, less morally enlightened past. John Rutland, the solicitor to the Proprietors of Entertainments Association, cites the Licensing Act of 1737 as being necessitated by the degraded position of the theatrical profession during the reign of Anne. It is a strange tension: the desire to romanticize certain selected aspects of the theatrical past (Shakespeare particularly) and the simultaneous desire to vilify it.

Yet another interesting take on the testimony of the music hall boosters concerns the transcript of music hall patron and working-class representative Matthew Hanly. Hanly was an avid music hall aficionado who attributed the so-called improvement of the halls to the inclusion of sketches in the repertoire. These sketches were a serious bone of contention between the music hall and theatre managers, and much of the testimony was devoted to a debate between those who favored allowing the music halls the privilege of doing sketches and those (largely theatre managers) who did not. Curiously, Hanly saw an essentially theatrical entertainment --the sketch--as being the salvation of the music hall. In his view, the theatre is seen as having a special status, representing an infusion of high culture into the lower cultural form represented by the halls. And so the devotees of music hall colluded in the fiction that the drama was somehow of a higher order than other forms of amusement.

This was a notion the theatre managers were all too happy to perpetuate. The eagerness to draw distinctions between music hall entertainments and the legitimate stage manifested itself in the frequent objections to allowing music halls to perform plays and in the unfavorable comparisons made between the art of drama and the relative

68 Select Committee 1892; 76 q. 1176.

69 Select Committee 1892; 327 q. 5171.
lowness of the halls and their audiences. The debate over the nature of sketches reflected a very strong residual concern about genre. Of course, it is something of a false distinction to separate concern over class from concern over genre because, by late in the century, the two issues were inextricably bound together. In 1892, the terms "regular" or "legitimate drama" were used much less frequently (if at all) than they had been in 1832, but clearly an attempt was being made on the part of theatre managers to assert the cultural primacy of the theatre by limiting the music halls to certain supposedly inferior entertainments. Music hall sketches were tolerable incursions into theatrical territory, but what exactly constituted a sketch? This was no easier a question than that of defining "legitimate" drama, but the committee nevertheless attempted to draw enforceable legal parameters. A sketch was determined to be a representation with no more than six speaking parts running less than 40 minutes. There was to have been at least a thirty minute interval between sketches and no two could have a connected plot.\(^70\) These generic distinctions were necessary in order to maintain even greater social distinctions.

William Fladgate, a solicitor representing the theatre managers, had a lengthy exchange with the committee on such distinctions, an exchange which did not redound to the benefit of the music halls. Fladgate admitted that some of the halls were of better quality than others and that some of the theatres were not of the highest repute, but added that a general rule could be extrapolated concerning both. "The fact that some music halls in their entertainments reach a higher level than others," he said, "and that some theatres in their entertainments reach a lower level than others, does not prevent there being a line of demarcation between the two."\(^71\) Significantly, in terms of the argument

\(^70\) Select Committee 1892; vi.

\(^71\) Select Committee 1892; 57 q. 861.
advanced above, Fladgate linked the value of the entertainment to the audience for which it was intended. "[C]ertainly," he said, "between the highest type of music hall and the lowest type of theatre there is still a considerable difference."

864. What would that difference be; that difference would scarcely be that one was a representative of cultured feeling, and that the other was a place where you merely went to drink and smoke, and had a kind of entertainment. I think you must find another difference?— You are catering for two different classes. The class who frequent music halls as a rule is not the class that frequents theatres. The class who frequent music halls are [sic] not attracted by even a rough and ready performance of some old-fashioned melodrama (there is a certain amount of art in the old-fashioned melodrama, a very great amount in some of them); the theatre-goer who admires art, and is perhaps in a district where there are not very many cultivated people will like to go to see the dramatic performance at the theatre, and he very likely would not go to the music hall. On the other hand the class who go to the music halls do not want to go to the theatres, and do not care about it; . . . .

865. Then your contention is that there is a distinction between the music hall and the theatre, and that they are frequented by a different class of people, that the people who go to the theatre go to the theatre because they like it, and those who go to the music hall go to the music hall because they like it?— Yes, certainly.

866. If that is the case, what is the objection to their being dramatic performances at the music hall? I can understand that there would be an objection on the part of the music hall managers, if, as you say, their audiences do not like dramatic performances?— I do not think they do much care about them, to begin with; but if the theatre is to be considered as in any way the home of an art, you had better keep it free from smoking and drinking. If you tell me that you do not consider the theatre the home of art at all, I have no answer to you; but if the theatre is to be in any way considered the home of art as a place in which art is cultivated, in which art is looked up to as being something to be cultivated, surely you had better leave it, without the addition of smoking and drinking, without the attraction of smoking and drinking, than bring it down to the fact that you are going to give, first, your smoking and drinking; and, secondly, your dramatic entertainment.
867. I quite agree with you there, but if in the West End theatres they were allowed by law to have drinking and smoking in the auditorium (I do not think they would do it), do you think they would find it suited to their class of audience?—I think a certain number of theatres would find it successful.

868. But would those be the best exponents of dramatic art?—There are theatres which would go down and become music halls in the course of a few years.

869. And would be frequented by the audience who like music halls, and who are an audience who [sic] do not like theatres?—I do not agree with you; you would be introducing a third class.

870. Your opinion, then, is that they would drag down their audience?—Yes.

871. That it would deteriorate art?—Yes, I do not see why it should not . .

Fladgate's testimony was loaded. Music hall was, for him, like a virus, posing a threat of infection. The demands of unrefined music hall patrons would be a lethal blow to true art, a prime example of the detrimental effects of exposure to the wrong sort of audience. Music hall patrons were not attracted to even the lowest forms of theatre (such as melodrama) and theatre-goers were, by and large, too "cultivated" to go to music halls. There were people, he admitted, who might go to theatres if they were allowed to smoke (another hot-button issue as seen below), but they would drag down the art of theatre to the music hall level. Of course, if Fladgate's contention that music hall audiences were uninterested in theatre had really been true, there would have been no cause for concern in allowing the halls the privilege of offering stage plays. Fladgate even attempted to

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72 Select Committee 1892; 57 q. 863-871.
prove the distinction between the two forms by arguing that it was a question of pedigree. Theatres, he stressed, originated as institutions nursed by the Crown; music halls were offshoots of public houses which had, during the reign of George II, to be regulated as a potential public nuisance.73

Irving referred to music hall managers as "publicans" who wanted to "swallow the theatres wholesale." 74 He, too, framed the theatre in terms of a "high" art too rarified to be considered in the same category as the variety stage. Irving’s tack was to paint the music hall artists as inferior grade performers. The music hall performers were not trained adequately to represent plays—they were skilled in their own way, of course, but they could hardly be considered equal in stature to legitimate actors, who were required to sublimate their egos (this, from Irving!) to the interest of art. Said Irving,

Work on the variety stage is more purely personal; here the effort of the artist, whatever be his talent, is of a more desultory kind. But in the theatre the artist is only part of an organisation, and has to subordinate himself and his powers to the development of a common end.75

Mercer Simpson, the treasurer of the Provincial Theatrical Managers' Association, was convinced that, if music halls were to be given rights to produce plays, they would surely be "low class plays," injurious to the art of drama. 76 Critic Joseph Carr, who was strongly opposed to drinking and smoking in theatres, nevertheless did not feel it was

73 Select Committee 1892; 45 q. 686-687.
74 Select Committee 1892; 65 q. 975.
75 Select Committee 1892; 64 q 975.
76 Select Committee 1892; 194 q.2827.
necessary to codify through legislation the distinction between theatre and music hall. "I think," he said, "that the art and its professors have won sufficient authority always to preserve that distinction for themselves." 77

The act of smoking and drinking had become symbolic of the déclassé working-class music hall audiences and their behavior. As Irving made clear, smoking and drinking would be such a distraction to the actors on stage, they would be unable to perform their roles. The theatre managers—especially Irving, John Hare and Lionel Brough—were clearly alarmed at the prospect of allowing the pipe and bowl into their auditoriums, and feared having to acquiesce if forced to compete directly with the music halls. Dublin manager Michael Gunn said that "it would lower both the status of the actors, and I think also of the audiences," 78 adding that he certainly would expect ladies to be driven from the theatre in the face of such behavior. Once again, the decorum of the theatre was held in contrast to the lower standards of the inferior music hall.

It was Archer who came to the defense of working-class social practices, and he lambasted the anti-smoking position as an elitist device intended "to keep down the amusement of a certain class of the population who prefer to smoke at their entertainments." But this view also smacked a bit of elitism. Allowing the lower classes to smoke in theatres, he said, would be a way of exposing them to "the best, the most intellectual, the most rational form of entertainment which they can be got to accept." 79

In an attempt to unmask the cultural chauvinism of the theatre managers, Archer revealed

77 Select Committee 1892; 324 q. 5136.
78 Select Committee 1892; 235 q. 3608.
79 Select Committee 1892; 262 q. 3999.
his own paternalistic view, one which viewed the theatre as an agent of elevation and improvement for poor, benighted proles. Perhaps Archer envisioned an army of working-class, pipe-smoking, hard-drinking Ibsenites.

Archer's vision notwithstanding, if the music halls catered to the working classes and the theatres to the more refined public (a simplistic and misleading statement, but one which might be inferred from much of the testimony), where were working-class theatre audiences? It is telling that there is so little discussion of the theatre-going proletariat. To read standard surveys such as Watson's one could easily suppose they didn't exist; but that, of course, was not the case. Perhaps a discussion of the relationship of working-class people to the theatre would have undermined the contention that those very same people, when seated in a music hall, were a detriment to dramatic art. Or perhaps the East End transpontine theatres which catered to the lower classes were simply not regarded as being significant enough to be factors in any argument. Surrey manager George Conquest, evidently a much more pragmatic man than any of his West End counterparts, was not averse to adopting the low-rent trappings of the music halls if it would give his bottom line a boost. Competition with music halls was killing him, he said; and so advocated that minor theatres "be worked the same as music halls," with tables in front for people with glasses and pipes. Here we have the minor East End theatres equated, not with the West End theatres as paragons of art, but with the lower classed music halls. Working-class theatre was not, in this view, truly theatre.

This was a contention supported by the critics. Carr declared that West End music halls survived only by offering distinctively different entertainment than that offered by the West End theatres. But the working-class East End theatres were a different story. Competition between theatres and music halls occurred only between East End

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80 Select Committee 1892; 214 q. 3223-36.
establishments, he said. If restrictions on stage plays were lifted for music halls, then "certain theatres in the East End of the town would suffer; [and] the West End theatres would undergo no change at all." Working-class audiences, it would seem, were suited only to enjoy a debased form of entertainment. Clement Scott agreed with Carr, saying "if West End managers want art with a big 'A,' why not let them have it, but why deny to the toilers and the masses art with a small 'a'?" Scott's comments were no doubt welcomed by theatre managers who must have been terrified at the thought of direct competition with such popular entertainment. It is interesting to note that the arguments offered by theatre managers and their supporters in the discussion of music hall privileges were not all that different from those offered by the patents against the minor theatre proprietors 60 years earlier. Hare, Irving, Brough et al. were the professional descendants of those minor theatre managers who were so eager to abolish the monopoly in 1832. Of course, they were no more dedicated to free trade than their professional forefathers, and, if they could achieve a protected economic sphere by portraying themselves as the guardians of high culture, then they would do so.

The guardians were not exclusively engaged in fending off the advances of music halls; they sometimes found it necessary to defend the honor of the profession from within their own ranks, as is illustrated in much of the testimony defending the efficacy of censorship. The overwhelming consensus was that censorship was a necessity, a restraint against the excesses of wayward managers and playwrights. Carr defended censorship on the rather bizarre grounds that it safeguarded the liberty of dramatists. Relying upon statute to protect public decency (similar to that which regulated non-dramatic literature), said Carr, fostered a dangerous dependency on the courts and the

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81 See note 61 above.

82 Select Committee 1892; 325 q. 5144.
police. A statute, he claimed, "could not possibly compass the more vivid and impressionable art of the theatre so effectively as an anticipatory censorship or examination. It would practically be giving to a police magistrate the functions that are now exercised by the Examiner of Plays; and personally I can imagine nothing less conducive to the liberty which dramatic authors enjoy under the present system." 83

Much of Carr's disdain for the discretion of magistrates and policemen was probably traceable to a deep-seated suspicion of democratic principles and institutions. Better to be ruled judiciously by an autocrat than be at the mercy of common policemen. This anti-democratic tendency—shared by a significant number of witnesses—extended to a deep mistrust of the London County Council, a popularly elected body which sought to usurp many of the powers traditionally held by the Lord Chamberlain. Almost to a person the theatre managers and their supporters objected to giving the Council regulatory powers. The support of censorship was more a support of the Censor than the general principle of censorship—as Carr's testimony again illustrates. When the County Council licenses music halls, he said, they in effect exercise a form of censorship over the entertainment, and "that is not a function which should be exercised by a body of that constitution [popularly elected]." 84 This was no altruistic argument in favor of music halls, but a forward defense of the theatre:

The higher the plane of art the more difficult and delicate becomes the task of determining its moral tendency, and I should consider it a grave misfortune both in the interests of art if the propriety of a serious play were made the subject of debate in the county council . . . . I am not criticising unfavourably any authority which the council may have exercised in regard to music halls. Where the forms of art are comparatively primitive and simple, as is the case with entertainments at music halls, the claims of morality may be asserted without much danger

83 Select Committee 1892; 322 q. 5105.

84 Select Committee 1892; 321 q. 5096.
of error. Even here, I think that the principle is dangerous; but in the more complex problems which would arise in regard to drama, I think its application might be disastrous.85

Carr's distinctions elevated drama to a higher plane than that occupied by music hall. Censorship (by the proper authority) ensured that the drama would retain its special status as Art with a capital 'A.' Clement Scott also saw danger in the abolition of censorship; take away the Examiner of Plays, he argued, and an outraged public, confronted with an intolerable breach of good taste, would have no other recourse than to call in the police, or resort to rioting.86 For both Carr and Scott, the public's inherent decency was no protection from the purveyors of filth—managers curiously indifferent, it would seem, to the tastes of their squeaky clean audiences. For both critics, the repressive state apparatus was not the censorship imposed by the man who Scott referred to as "the liberal-minded, highly cultured servant of the State who now holds the post [of Examiner]," 87 but the arbitrary system of enforcement they feared would arise in its absence.

One issue which had retained currency since the 1830s was that of the perceived shortage of qualified actors, or at least the perception remained current among certain theatre managers. Not everyone agreed that there was such a shortage—as is illustrated by the testimony of J.G. Johnson. Johnson was a former stage actor who had turned to the music halls for regular employment. Three or four hundred actors, Johnson told the committee, were playing the halls for want of theatrical engagements. Johnson knew

85 Select Committee 1892; 321 q. 5098.
86 Select Committee 1892; 326 q. 5144. "But to whom," Scott asked, is the public to appeal in case their feelings are outraged? To the nearest policeman or to the rough-and-ready power of pulling up the benches?"
87 Select Committee 1892; 326 q. 5144.
who to blame for this predicament—well-heeled amateurs who were flooding the job market and displacing professional performers who really needed the work. The old stock company system had been the perfect mechanism to insure that aspiring actors paid their dues and received adequate training, "but now," Johnson complained, "a gentleman with money and influence seems to be thrust into the profession, and he plays a part in a theatre, and from that time forth he is acknowledged as an actor. He thinks so himself at any rate." 88 Being on the lower economic end of his profession, it isn't surprising that Johnson betrayed a touch of class resentment. Those who could afford to pay a premium and work without pay received preferential treatment at the hands of managers who were all too willing to save money wherever they could. 89 The improved social status of the theatrical profession meant that theatrical footsoldiers like Johnson had to compete for jobs with well-connected sons and daughters of barristers, clergy and other middle-class professionals. 90 It must have been a bitter pill for Johnson and his fellows to swallow.

But Irving did not sympathize. Like Dunn, Kemble and Macready in the 1830s, he saw the problem as a shortage of talent, not of jobs. The detritus of the profession was not worthy to perform the drama. To have allowed these performers—who were trained only for the coarsest variety acts—to take the legitimate stage or to perform plays in public houses, would have been a disastrous blow to the work of all true theatre artists. To inundate the stages of the metropolis with second-rate actors who "have no care for

88 Select Committee 1892: 298 q. 4603.

89 The down side of this arrangement was that aspiring actors were frequently defrauded of their premiums and left with no work at all. See Michael Booth, Theatre in the Victorian Age (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 102.

90 See Baker 86-89.
any of the higher parts of the art, you do an incalculable mischief to the drama," he said. The drama was too good for the public house and the public house (and its audience) was certainly no good for the theatre.

It might be supposed from these sentiments that Irving saw little utility in using the drama for educational purposes. His reference to "the higher parts of the art" had been in response to one committee member's query about the possibility of educating music hall audiences with the drama. Irving would have none of it, calling the outcome of such an enterprise "degrading." And yet it was Irving who took a very strong stand in favor of using the drama to educate and improve audiences. The audiences he had in mind were obviously not the ones for which Johnson made his living performing. The music hall was a lost cause, but the theatre was "distinguished from other places of amusement, a possible place of educational influence 'a place of recreation for the intelligent and sober-minded.'" This is an interesting inconsistency because it again illustrates so clearly the desire to separate the drama from other forms of entertainment, to isolate it and iconicize it.

Irving's attitude is also worthy of mention because it is characteristic of a particular and very Victorian attitude—that recreation should have, above all else, an improving effect on the participant. Altick, in his The Shows of London, refers to this construct as "rational entertainment," and explores the nineteenth-century fascination with scientific lectures, ethnological exhibits, technological displays and the intense desire to put an educational gloss on pseudo-scientific entertainments. The fad for improving

91 Select Committee 1892; 72 q. 1084.
92 Select Committee 1892; 72 q. 1084.
93 Select Committee 1892; 64 q. 975.
entertainment peaked long before 1892 (Altick's study ends in the mid-century), but the residual impulse to improve (almost always someone else) was still strong in fin de siècle England.

The difference was that whereas many of Altick's examples are of carnival-type sideshows run by hucksters whom one suspects were fully aware of the phoniness of their educational pretensions, Irving and his colleagues were dead serious. The theatre had come into its own—not just as refined entertainment for the elite, but as a great moral and educational force. Rational entertainment, or rational recreation, had most often been used to justify such activities as museum-going and attendance at workman's institute lectures, but very rarely as a justification for theatre-going. One notable exception is that of Charles Dickens's famous Household Words article, "Two Views of a Cheap Theatre," which historian Janice Carlisle has described "less as a disinterested account of a particular theatre than as proof of the extent to which Victorian theater in general was seen to serve political functions conformable to middle-class goals."


It seems doubtful, given his upper middle-class clientele, that Irving saw himself as an educational missionary to the great unwashed, but he did see the drama as a great purifier of public taste, proclaiming "[s]eries acting" to be "the highest educational function of the stage." Rutland made a similar argument for the music halls, which he called "a popular educator for the better class theatres." Rutland's testimony is of interest because, as a spokesman for the variety theatres, he advanced the notion that music halls had evolved over the decades into a better, more respectable class of entertainment, but at the same time felt it necessary to acknowledge the primacy of the regular theatres and their art. The halls were now "of a character entirely different from such places as were formerly licensed for music and dancing under the Act of George the Second . . . . The audience at the music halls consists for the most part of tradesmen, clerks, and the more respectable artisans and mechanics, with their wives and families." The progress of music halls thus mirrored that of the theatres, but at a respectful distance. Whereas the more refined upper middle classes had rediscovered the theatre, it was the aristocracy of labor which had embraced music hall. Hanly agreed, arguing that variety sketches "generally have a good moral lesson, and are conducive to the best interests of the industrial classes who are the principal frequenters of music halls." For Rutland and Hanly, dramatic entertainment was not degraded by such surroundings, but instead had an elevating effect on those members of the lower classes struggling to improve themselves. Scott, too, supported the idea of theatre as rational recreation, expressing his conviction "that drama of the best and purest and music of the

97 Select Committee 1892; 64 q.975.

98 Select Committee 1892; 111 q. 1497.

99 Select Committee 1892; 97 q. 1361.

100 Select Committee 1892; 327 q. 5171.
noblest and most elevating character might go hand in hand with religion and education in brightening the lives and aiding the welfare of the people." 101 Scott's comparison of drama to religion elevated the theatre to the level of the sacred.

But the sacred is often a close relative of the profane, and just as those giving testimony before both select committees often wrestled with contradictions and opera, so, too, did those who wrote about the theatre for the periodical press. The legitimating power of the press was not wielded neatly. Contradictions abounded, and many writers found themselves in ideological double-binds as they attempted to reconcile time-honored anti-theatrical prejudices with what was essentially a defense of the stage, or commonplace assumptions about the lack of integrity and moral character of actors and actresses with profiles that quite clearly were intended to represent practitioners as respectable citizens. The next three chapters examine the content of theatre-related articles in the eclectic press, each of which focuses on one of the three most discernible and influential topics found in Victorian magazines. Subsumed under these three major rubrics can be found discussion of many of the smaller, less-discussed issues. Chapter 3, for instance, principally examines the press's response to an implied anti-theatrical prejudice, but also includes discussion of the role of the Lord Chamberlain and the efficacy of censorship. Chapter 5, which centers on the notion of rational entertainment, also explores many of the issues raised by the committee on working-class audiences and music hall.

101 Select Committee 1892; 324 q. 5144.
CHAPTER 3

THE PERIODICAL PRESS AND ANTI-THEATRICAL PREJUDICE

"The Proper use of a national theatre might be a permanent good, the abuse of it is only an accidental evil."


"Your Royal Highness, you are a mighty prince; . . . . but you were not born in the year 1836, and you never saw the legs of Madame Vestris."

George Augustus Sala, Belgravia March 1869: 105.

In the Anti-Theatrical Prejudice, Jonas Barish points out that, for much of the nineteenth century, "anti-theatricalism [continued] to run strong in both the ecclesiastical establishment in France and the low church sects in England." Barish goes on to illustrate the ways in which "suspicion of the stage and of actors [continued ] to smoulder, bursting out from time to time into sudden and disconcerting blaze."1 Beset by sectarian critics and such notable secular writers as Charles Kingsley and Charles

Lamb, the theatre, and most especially actors, continued to be objects of scorn for a considerable portion of the nineteenth-century British intellectual community and, one might assume, the general public.

Anti-theatricalism was indeed rife within a significant portion of British society during the first half of the century, while at the same time the stage was seen by many as having been abandoned by the better classes. "Many within the theatre at the beginning of the century," writes James Woodfield, "regretted the passing of a more genteel era, the age of Garrick when the audience was predominantly middle-class and relatively well-mannered . . . ." How curious, then, that the mainstream eclectic press remained largely free from overt anti-theatricalism during the early part of the 1800s. Given the deep-seated suspicions regarding the theatre that were prevalent within the late Georgian and early Victorian period, it would stand to reason that the organs of public opinion would reflect, at least to some extent, early-century antagonism toward the stage. Yet this was the case neither at the beginning of the period nor at the end. To be sure, magazine writers were frequently critical of the current state of the theatre—by which they chiefly meant dramatic literature—but rarely, if ever, did they attack the institution of the stage itself. The ideal of the theatre was almost always upheld, even if the actual experience was subject to criticism. The consensus within large segments of the early-century magazine press was that the theatre was an ideal and efficacious art form, even if it was practiced imperfectly or prone to the whims of indiscriminate audiences.

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And this is an important distinction. If we accept Professor Barish's book as the definitive text on anti-theatrical prejudice, we must recognize that anti-theatricalism is inherently essentialist and irrational, even as attacks upon the quality of any particular piece of theatre are rational, whether we agree with the specific criticisms or not. Such criticism assumes a standard of quality that is attainable and can justify itself by citing any deviation from that standard. Anti-theatricalism assumes an essential dysfunction within the institution itself, an iniquity which cannot be purged no matter what the talents of the actor may be, or the quality of the virtues expressed by the dramatist. If we examine key periodicals, particularly in the first half of the century when the theatre was at its lowest ebb in reputation and in practice, we begin to see an attitude toward the stage that borders on boosterism, an ameliorative way of viewing the stage and its practices. It is as though the press sought to save the theatre from itself, first by acknowledging many of its faults, and then by promoting the institution, legitimating the institution, as an ideal and as a national treasure.

Closely tied to the subject of anti-theatricalism is the subject of censorship and the efficacy of the Censor, whose job it was to keep a watchful eye over dramatic texts and to protect the public from any putatively harmful effects of the drama. Official censorship in Great Britain was a tradition that had its modern foundation in the Licensing Act of 1737, legislation which entrusted to the Lord Chamberlain the power of licensing theatres (in certain prescribed areas of the realm, such as Westminster and other cities of Royal residence) and of the censorship of plays. The immediate cause

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3 The suppression of plays and the censorship of the theatre by the Lord Chamberlain or the Master of Revels can be traced back to the reign of Henry VIII, but such practice was not codified by law.
for the implementation of the act had been an uproar created by The Golden Rump, a political and supposedly seditious satire which found its way into the hands of a disapproving Sir Robert Walpole. Printed matter was never subject to such regulation; but performance, with its intimate and immediate relationship to the spectator, required a stricter standard of supervision. Clearly, the political and moral sensibilities of the public (and the political interests of the regime) warranted state interference in certain public pleasures. It can be argued that the censorship, being directed exclusively at texts intended for live performance, reflected a fear of the stage, a fear rooted in anti-theatricalism. The immediacy of live performance was deemed more of a potential threat than books, newspapers or the fine arts; theatre had the potential to corrupt the public in a way which nothing else could. Interestingly, the eclectic press's treatment of censorship reflected another aspect of its role as a legitimating force. As this chapter will demonstrate, the prior restraint of the censor was widely viewed by the magazine press as an unnecessary protection. In the latter half of the century, much of the press espoused a view in which the middle-class public, more than capable of regulating its own affairs, was seen as the judge and arbiter of its own moral standards. The middle-class public was in this way legitimated as a force which, independent of the paternalistic Lord Chamberlain, could regulate the theatre on its own and, indeed through its very role as a patron of the art, contain the theatre's potential to corrupt.

Early century anti-theatrical diatribes were not unheard of in the magazine press, but they were rare. As one such rarity published in the Eclectic Review makes abundantly clear, there were journalists who did see the stage as a repository of evil. In a response
to a series of pro-theatre sermons published by the Rev. James Plumptre, in which he maintained that the stage "in itself" was not evil, but merely prone to abuse, the *Eclectic Review* shot back that the idea of the stage in the abstract could not be separated from actual practice.

If by the stage, described under these terms of limitation, the written drama were meant, no question could be more easily decided . . . . But, understanding . . . the stage [to be] literally the theatre and its performances, we do not exactly comprehend what is meant by the question whether it be lawful 'in itself.' The estimate of the good or evil of the theatre must necessarily be founded on the combined consideration of a number of particulars . . . .

Since the theatre in the abstract is of no practical consideration, the critic maintained, it must be judged by the way it is actually practiced. For the *Eclectic Review*, this meant that the theatre must be held accountable for

the effect on the human mind of exhausting its passions on fictitious objects, —the character of that part of society that will at all times be most addicted to amusements, and will chiefly support them, —the tendency and the attendant circumstance of immense nocturnal assemblages of people in great towns, —the quality of the works of the great national dramatic writers that must necessarily form the main stock of the theatre (till writers shall be put in requisition to dramatize and versify the Homilies and the Whole Duty of Man)—the probable moral character of a set of men and women employed under the circumstances inseparable from a company of players, and the vast expense, original and permanent, of the whole theatrical establishment.

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5 Rev. of Plumptre, 1034.
Here we have almost the entire gamut of traditional accusations against the theatre. Theatre corrupts the mind (and therefore the soul); it attracts the less savory segments of society and encourages them to congregate at an indecent hour of the night; its subjects are of poor quality and suffer from a lack of godly content, and its practitioners are of dubious moral character. As an added detraction, the theatre is costly and wasteful of resources that could be put to better use. Plumptre, accusing the theatre patron of "exhausting . . . passions," as though passion were exhaustible, saw the theatre as a form of mental Onanism.

But most early-century journalistic attitudes toward the moral influence of the drama were more complex. Several decades after the review of Plumptre, one critic at The Monthly Review would vent his spleen in a discussion of the posthumous memoirs of Alfred Bunn, the famous lessee of Drury Lane and Covent Garden. The attack was vicious. It was, the author maintained, difficult to read Bunn's anecdotes "without feeling pretty strongly that the whole fraternity of players and managers is despicable . . . and that the neglect of the theatre by the enlightened and the virtuous furnishes a striking illustration of the advancement of civilization [sic]." Furthermore, the Review pilloried the former manager as one who never "had the least chance of serving the interests of the Drama," and accused him of having "seriously damaged the reputation of theatricals, whether as institutions or actors."

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suffered "from internal disease," and it demonstrated "that neither refined amusement, literature, nor public morals are of any account . . . ." The equation with theatre as a "disease" is as unconditional a condemnation as could be conceived.

And yet the essay exhibits a curious tension between an impulse to condemn and a desire for reform. Unlike the critic in the first example, the author of the Monthly Review did not damn the theatre as an institution; he defended it against what he considered to be Bunn's libelous and self-serving anecdotes.

Mr. Bunn, whose principal end is to furnish a thorough defence of his management, would have the world to take deeper interest in the pecuniary results to him of his undertakings in that line, than in the prosperity of the drama, or the refinement of play-goers. He was often charged with neglecting Shakspeare, and substituting mere melo-dramatic pieces, spectacles, Ducrow's horsemanship and stud, and the wild beast-tamer with his lions and tigers, in obedience, and to the encouragement of a vile and vicious taste. To this his answer, attempted to be supported by numerous bookkeeping details, is, that he was obliged to yield to necessity, for that the great Dramatist did not pay so well as the pieces and the pageants which were so often preferred. He even argues that England does not possess actors who can do justice to Shakspeare, who can adequately represent him. Even Macready is unequal to the task, according to the authority before us.

The theatre was diseased only if the reader were to accept Bunn's subjective take on the perfidy of his colleagues. It is important to note that, in the mind of this author, the drama was indeed a legitimate interest to be served, and therefore one which presumably deserved to be served. Bunn's management, which as the Monthly Review maintained

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7 Rev. of Bunn, 460.

8 Rev. of Bunn, 461.
"never was hearty in behalf of the legitimate drama,"9 was symptomatic of the drama's status as a "high art" held hostage to a corrupt system. Nothing could be done until that system was destroyed, and the system could never be destroyed until the patents were abrogated and free trade sanctioned. Until then, the theatre was doomed to suffer the ill-effects of the star system, "to attract minds of a low than those of a high grade," and would continue to resist "the substitution of the legitimate drama in place of spectacle."10

The essay contains a litany of complaints about the putatively wretched condition of the stage, but it is no anti-theatrical rant. It expresses a hope and a prayer for an institution capable of great things (i.e., the production of "legitimate" drama), an institution that suffers no essential defect, but which is held captive in the hands of short-sighted practitioners. And even on this latter point, the author waffles. The reviewer thought it possible, for example, that Bunn's account may have been "unjust to the majority of his professional brethren," and Macready was "esteemed for his private virtues . . . ." 11 Certainly these conciliatory sentiments would be unthinkable emanating from the pen of a latter-day Jeremy Collier.

Admittedly, these articles do not portray the theatre in a positive light, and in the case of the Plumptre review, reflect naked anti-theatricalism at its worst. But they also reflect an aberration. So aberrant is the first author's point of view, that the article is in fact the

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9 Rev. of Bunn 461.
10 Rev. of Bunn, 462.
11 Rev. of Bunn, 460.
only one of its kind to be found in the entire sample of articles chosen for this study. Significantly, it was written in 1809, some twenty years before Victoria's ascension—which technically places it outside the chronological parameters of the dissertation. In the instance of the *Monthly Review*, we have, at worst, a clash of conflicting sentiments, and none of them hostile to the theatre as an ideal. I include these examples here because they demonstrate how truly rare such overt attacks were in the first half of the century, and how seldom they were levied by the eclectic press. If silence is acquiescence, the theatre was in good stead with the mainstream press throughout Victoria's reign.

Most often the press's chief complaint was not that the theatre was bad, but that it was all too often practiced badly. The amateur theatricals of the Bertram family in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* are, as Barish has insightfully pointed out, tainted "as self-evidently immoral from the outset." So much so, that Austen implies at least an indirect connection between the theatricals and Henry Crawford's adulterous affair with Maria Bertram. But we should compare Austen's moral essentialism with the much more lenient attitude of the unknown author of "Family Dramaticals," an article appearing in *Bentley's Miscellany* in 1838. Here again we have a fictional representation of home-grown theatrics, but one in which the author's moral indignation is conspicuously absent.

12 Barish, 300.

The article is a send-up of the pretensions and incompetence of amateur actors written in the form of a letter ostensibly penned by a woman to a young actor in the provinces. In the letter, the woman describes an evening at the Stickleback home, during which she is subjected to "the irrecoverable contamination of the Stickleback theatricals." Production values, as the following passage illustrates, are non-existent.

I am convinced that hardly a floor was left covered by its respective baize or carpet; that the windows were all despoiled of their curtains, and that the bedsteads were reduced to what sailors call "bare poles," by having resigned their valances &c. to furnish forth the tirings and properties of the entertainments . . . .

The proscenium of the stage was formed by the opening of two folding-doors, which, I was assured by Mrs. Stickleback, who appeared to have no little pride and complacency in pointing out the most preposterous of the arrangements, were absolutely taken off their hinges. 15

During the course of the evening the letter-writer is subjected to suffocation from the smoke of the footlights, 16 the "lisping and mincing," not to mention thoroughly incomprehensible, speeches of the actors, 17 and a near-disastrous fire set by a monkey in a Hussar's uniform. 18

15 "Family Dramaticals," 86.
16 "Family Dramaticals," 87.
17 "Family Dramaticals," 88.
18 "Family Dramaticals," 90.
There is very little suggestion of immorality here; the violations on the part of the Sticklebacks are not moral, but aesthetic. In consequence of his ill-advised foray into the theatre, Mr. Stickleback is not impelled, as is Austen's Henry Crawford, to commit adultery; he simply vows never to attempt a production again. This is no essentialist critique, but a satire about incompetence. But to make fun of the Sticklebacks's pretensions is also to imply that a standard exists for a theatre that is beneficial and worthwhile.

In those rare instances where magazine articles addressed the subject of anti-theatricalism directly, they did so in response to what were seen as spurious attacks. The result of these responses was a vigorous defense of the institution. The theatre was not often treated as a subject by the Monthly Review during the 1830s, but if any anti-theatrical sentiments lurked within the bosom of its staff, they had ample opportunity to emerge in one essay in which the Review critiqued a Methodist tract that was highly antagonistic to the drama. The morality of scripture was undeniable, the Review critic maintained, and applicable to all "circumstances of which human nature is susceptible." But the reviewer went on to add that criticisms of the stage were tantamount, from a religious point of view, to acts of supererogation.

Yet, some Christians have endeavoured to improve upon the Gospel, and to aim at a sublimer spirituality, than it seems to them to exhibit. In an early age of the Gospel the Gnostics, in our own the evangelical sects, have made this daring attempt. In the middle ages it was made by the Platonicians. In the hands of them all it equally failed, and the general fate of all such attempts has been, to expose both the leaders and followers to just ridicule and contempt.19

19 Rev. of The Drama brought to the Test of Scripture, and found wanting. Monthly
Human beings, the critic declared, have an innate need for recreation, and the rejection of certain innocent pleasures runs contrary to the fundamental requirements of good health. To reject the theatre on the grounds that its excesses are objectionable is to discount the benefits and virtues of the stage. In any case, the stimulation of the senses is nowhere found in scripture to be a sin in and of itself. "With respect, therefore, to the drama, the chief subject of the work before us, the mere circumstance of it being a mental or sensual gratification is no objection to it." The Review critic is extremely careful to attack those who would misuse scripture in their arguments against the stage without impugning the scriptures themselves, or placing himself in a position where he might be accused of anti-religiosity. To advance an extra-scriptural argument against the theatre is an arrogant attempt to achieve "a sublimer spirituality," an attempt which is not only conceited, but unnecessary. Gratification of the senses and, by extension, enjoyment of the drama, "injures few, and is a cause of happiness to many," asserts the author.

But the Review saves its most compelling and obvious answer for last. The author delivers a withering blow to non-conformist public piety when he allows that the Methodist "objections to the drama, apply with equal force to many of the gratifications which the Methodists allow themselves. There is nothing which the scriptures reprobate in a higher degree," he goes on to say, "than a love of riches, or the pursuits of ambition,"


20 Rev. of The Drama brought to the Test of Scripture and found wanting, 550.

21 Rev. of The Drama brought to the Test of Scripture, and found wanting, 549.
neither of which are particularly shunned by Christians of any denomination. To attend the theatre, the author implies, is a pursuit on a moral par with any other respectable activity or recreation.

Several years later, the Review would again come to the defense of the stage in response to author J.P. Style's contention "that the interests of national liberty may be most injuriously affected by a prevailing passion for theatrical amusements." The Review critic conceded that Styles's book contained "a great deal of important truth," but maintained that "the reverend author carries some of his views too far, or rather abides too exclusively by certain principles; not perceiving that were the stage kept under due regulations it might be purified of some of its dangerous influences..." So in the opinion of the Monthly Review, it was government regulation that would protect the public and the country from the excesses to which the theatre was prone. It was, of course, a bit of a backhanded defense, with the critic being sure to get in a dig or two at the expense of English audiences and their "ruffian displays," but it was a defense nonetheless. The theatre had great potential, the author implied, and with the aid of the censor and enough regulation it could aspire to "a taste far less hostile to refinement and morals..."

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22 Rev. of The Drama brought to the Test of Scripture and found wanting, 552.


24 Rev. of Styles, 297-8.

25 Rev. of Styles, 298.

26 Rev. of Styles, 298.
Other magazines followed suit. In 1830 Fraser’s Magazine allowed that while the drama was "not the most important thing in the world... .it is by no means without its advantages and uses," and administered quite a scolding to those who bowed to fashion and abandoned the drama for the opera:

Its house is a rational, gentlemanlike place of resort. Its effect, on morals and manners, even in these days is considerable. And, above all, it is a source, when properly conducted, of very high enjoyment.

That it should have lost part of its old attractions is a thing to be lamented. The fact is unlucky for its professors; probably it is injurious to the public also. For the public will have amusement of some kind, and we doubt prodigiously whether they will adopt a worthier object when they abandon the English Drama. To quit sense for sound only—as is the case with those who transfer their affections from our theatre to the museum of singing-birds in the Haymarket—seems ludicrous in itself. It amounts to an impeachment of the national understanding.27

The defection to the opera was not without its causes, and Fraser’s was quick to acknowledge them. The article is a litany of familiar complaints—the largeness of the houses, the inferior quality of new plays, the cost of admission, etc.—all conditions which are commonly cited by historians as causes for the decline of the early nineteenth-century stage. But the author is torn between conflicting attitudes. Actors and actresses have destroyed the stage by abusing the star system and impoverishing the managers,28 he claims, but yet he devotes the final pages of the article to the talents of various actors,


28 "The Playhouses and the Players," 647.
"some of whom," the author allows, "have given us, at various times, much pleasure. We like them; and, though there are some incurable simpletons amongst them, we are disposed to look at many of them with a friendly eye." Fanny Kemble had "sprung at once into the chair of the Tragic Muse;" Edmund Kean had "advanced the histrionic art," and Macready, an "excellent actor," could "do capital things when he [let] his better genius command him." The theatre is a mess, the author seems to argue, and yet, it is also a "gentlemanlike place of resort;" the contemporary drama was inferior, yet still had "considerable" good effect on manners and morals. Stars are spoiled children that have ruined the theatre, with the exception of those stars mentioned by the author. Some of these, Kean in particular, were revolutionary, having "put the ancient monotony [of old-fashioned acting] to flight, and [so] doing a world of good . . . ." These contradictions can only be understood in terms of the ameliorative model mentioned above.

These preceding examples strongly suggest a pro-theatre bias on the part of the eclectic periodical press throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. But it is important to note that negative social attitudes regarding the stage did not completely disappear with the demographic trends in the latter part of the 1800s. Writing during the heyday of the nineteenth-century theatrical revival, author P. Quin Keegan appears to

29 "The Playhouses and the Players," 647.
adopt the old anti-theatrical canard that actors and dramatists are morally tainted and fundamentally inadequate as practitioners of virtue. "Who will contend," Keegan asks, that religious emotion, that moral enthusiasm prevailed extensively amongst the great playwrights of the Elizabethan era? It is familiarly known that the character of many of their lives was anything but sane, prudent or virtuous. It is known that Marlowe, Greene, and Nash led infamous lives, and died infamous deaths; and that in those old days, the actor's profession was classed with that of the rogue and vagabond. The duties of an actor are generally of such an exciting, energetic description, they involve such a lavish prodigality of life-energy, that, as it would seem, little time or vigour is available for the practice of devotion, or for the cultivation of moral habits.\(^{33}\)

But what sounds like a standard attack on theatre people is actually part of a defense (albeit not one that is particularly original) against an even more pernicious anti-theatrical chestnut: that the theatre itself has a morally deleterious effect on its audience. Despite the dramatists's putative moral inadequacy, they were imbued with the power to "bestow grace on subjects not naturally capable or worthy of such treatment."\(^{34}\) Keegan advances a neo-Aristotelian argument in favor of the theatre when he claims that the appalling events in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* or Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy* serve to re-invigorate a sense of moral outrage and stimulate the human conscience.\(^{35}\) This catharsis of indignation induces what Keegan calls a "consummate


\(^{34}\) Keegan, 338.

\(^{35}\) Keegan, 340-1.
moral sensibility," a "righteous indignation against crime—the shock of recoil from the transgressor of God's moral law." Furthermore, the dramatist is one who perceives that which the ordinary mind cannot. Specifically, his "keen poetic vision . . . intervenes to discover and indicate some quality or feature not perceptible to the common eye."

So even though Keegan exhibits a degree of prejudice against actors and dramatists, his vigorous defense of the theatre (and by "theatre" it is apparent that he refers to actual performance and not merely to the reading of dramatic texts) makes it clear that he is no anti-theatrical crank. What is more, Keegan historicizes his argument when he chooses the Elizabethan period as his subject. It was Marlowe, Greene and Nash who "led infamous lives," lives led without benefit of nineteenth-century moral sensibilities. But Marlowe, Greene and Nash were dead and the moral quality of their lives was now irrelevant. It is their work, imbued with such consummate insight into the human condition, which is still performed and, presumably, still has the power to stimulate the conscience.

Keegan, 340.
Keegan, 342.
Keegan, 346.

To be fair, it should be mentioned that Keegan does take a shot at contemporary audiences when he says that the Elizabethans' s appeal "to the inner emotions would, in this excitement-loving nineteenth century, be either utterly disregarded, or even perhaps, be exposed to contemptuous ridicule" (340). It is unclear, however, if Keegan's criticism pertained to all audiences or those which patronized the melodrama or other forms of popular theatre.

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Of course, Keegan writes in the latter half of the nineteenth century, at the threshold of the theatrically genteel 1880s, and that is a fact worth noting for two reasons. Firstly, the article comes at a time when the theatre is enjoying a renaissance of respectability. If Keegan is offering a defense of the theatre, why is it necessary to do so? Secondly, if we choose to emphasize the author's antipathy toward the lifestyles of theatre professionals, we come face to face with a similar contradiction. In an age in which the practitioners of theatre are joining the ranks of middle-class professionals and enjoying the benefits of respectability, we find evidence that certain archaic prejudices had survived the social renaissance of the theatre. But with regard to Keegans' criticism of dramatists, it is worth noting that he makes no charge against any of the living dramatists of his day, and instead directs his charges against a coterie of dead poets whose moral failings could be ascribed more to the age in which they lived, rather than the profession of playwriting per se. His description of Elizabethan actors includes their quasi-legal status as rogues and vagabonds, but he is careful to historicize that depiction, and makes no similar allusion to or allegations against contemporary practitioners.

It can be argued that the evidence presented here is nothing more than anecdotal, given the small number of examples cited. The examples are few, however, because they are rare. Of the more than 400 articles examined for this study, only the handful cited above deal directly with anti-theatrical prejudice. With the exception of the Eclectic Review's response to Plumptre, they all offer a positive attitude toward the drama, if not its practitioners, and even in the case of the debate over censorship, a debate which intensified in the second half of the century and a subject most likely to draw out any vestige of anti-theatrical sentiment, we find very little such expressed, and a large degree of mixed feelings about the efficacy of the practice. The justification for
censorship's exclusive authority over theatrical texts is inherently anti-theatrical. But the extent to which the press of the mid- and late-century saw the public as a self-regulating body, indicates the extent to which the press was again engaged in legitimating the respectable playgoers who, in turn, by their very presence at the theatres and in the exercise of their considered judgment, legitimated and made respectable the drama itself.

Again, as with the discussion of the review of Plumptre, it is useful to begin this survey of articles on censorship by examining an article which did not express such optimism regarding public taste and self-regulation. All The Year Round found great efficacy in the censorship and strenuously defended it in one essay penned after the death of E.F. Smyth Pigott, the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays, in 1895. Pigott had been an anti-Ibsenite whom All The Year Round claimed had licensed the Norwegian playwright's plays "because he considered them to be too absurd to do any harm."^® Certain injudicious comments from censorship opponents, principally William Archer and George Bernard Shaw— concerning Mr. Pigott's intelligence and sophistication had prompted All The Year Round to castigate the anti-censorship lobby. Shaw had argued that "a staggering list of authors" could be produced who had not written for the theatre since the days of Walpole and the Licensing Act, a statement which All The Year Round likened to "a proposal which reminds one of the criminal who opposed to the witness of his theft the testimony of a dozen of his friends who swore that they did not see him commit it." 41 Besides, the author contended, the


alternative would be to have a sort of *ex post facto* law which would punish the authors of obscene or politically unacceptable plays and those who produce them after the fact.

It is sometimes—often, indeed—said that a Censorship such as that which deals with the theatre would not be allowed to last for a week if it were applied to other forms of literature and art; and the statement may be true, although, in face of the perfect apathy and indifference of the public to the Lord Chamberlain and all his works, I doubt it. But it must not be forgotten that the law steps in, very effectually sometimes, in the case of published books and exhibited pictures which are held to be immoral or improper. Poor Mr. Vizetelly, I should think, after his sentence of fine and imprisonment for having published translations of some of Zola's books, must often have meditated on the advantages of a Censorship which stops you at the outset, over one which waits until you have completed your publication, and then pounces on you with unsheathed claws and gleaming, murderous teeth.⁴²

It does not occur to the author of the essay that the state should not interfere at all; the only debate is over the manner and the timing of the interference. The public, it is implied, must be protected from the corruption of obscenity, and the government from seditious attacks. In the first instance it is assumed that the public cannot judge for itself or has not the moral balance to discern that which is morally improper and therefore dangerous. In the second instance it is assumed that the public is gullible and open to the influence of subversive propaganda. And yet, the public is also paradoxically seen as being more discerning than the censor himself. "[M]any plays," argues the essayist, "have been licensed of late years which have impressed the public with the idea that the Examiner of Plays was, if any particular fault could be found with him, far too amiable

and easy." If the licensing of plays should be abolished, then so too would the licensing of music halls and theatres, leaving open a window of permissiveness and anarchy that the public, so wise and yet so impressionable, would never tolerate.

There is another aspect of this essay worth noting, apart from its somewhat twisted logic. Its argument is dependent upon the assumption that the theatre, alone among the arts, is a special threat to the moral disposition of the public and therefore subject to special scrutiny and regulation. This is at heart a true anti-theatrical position, one which assumes that the stage, perhaps because of the immediacy of theatrical performance, yields a unique and often unhealthy power to shape the perceptions and proclivities of the spectator. We do not find literature or painting to be subject to the prior restraint of the censor, both of which, as media, are perfectly capable of disseminating subversive and putatively immoral ideas. It is in the attribution to the theatre of "mysterious iniquity" that makes the argument anti-theatrical. How ironic that we find this article published in 1895, during the great period of theatrical "respectability." Irving had been knighted and Charles Kean had been made Master of Revels, but apparently they still had to be watched very carefully.

But again, if we look at the handful of articles which directly dealt with the censorship or the morality of the theatre in general, articles from such publications as The Monthly Review, Blackwood's, Chamber's Edinburgh Journal, and Belgravia published at various times throughout the century, we find a much different attitude toward the stage, manifested, again, in a thorough defense of the theatre as an institution. One early

discussion on the subject of regulation and censorship comes, appropriately enough, from *The Monthly Review*’s commentary on the published proceedings of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Dramatic Literature of 1832. It is interesting to note that, of all the panoply of issues covered by the committee (see Chapter 2), the reviewer chooses to discuss only two: what he refers to as "the gross and intolerable grievances to which dramatic authors are at this moment liable," and the censorship. **The first issue is more properly dealt with in Chapter V, but the author’s treatment of the second is a stunning example of the ill-will borne toward the Lord Chamberlain’s examiner and the surprising amount of confidence shown in the ability of the theatre to regulate itself toward the public good and the public’s ability to set for itself standards of decency. The author’s first volley is unequivocal. The drama is an institution indispensable for the greatness of any people. To prove his point, the author reverts to a classic Aristotelian argument: the theatre is good because it is pleasurable. In every civilized country," he contends, "theatrical amusements are of sufficient consequence to be worthy of the national care; and it is only natural that they should be so, since the primary object of contriving them is to please the public in general." It being established that the institution of the theatre was a good and necessary thing, the author then sought blame for the present allegedly poor condition of the national stage. It was


an unfortunate reality, he wrote, that the interests of national culture sometimes conflict with the interests of property and commercial concerns, "the transactions of which do not properly constitute subjects on which the public may animadivert." The injuries done to the drama were not, in this author's opinion, in any way the fault of dramatists, who struggled against impossible odds to make a living, and he makes no attempt to imply any putative immorality either in the plays being written or in the composition of audiences, or in the conduct of actors and other practitioners.

The largest albatross around the neck of the national stage was its dependence upon the economic realities of competition, and the greatest injury to the drama was the system which allowed "fools and knaves [managers] to reap the profitable harvest that has been sown by genius and industry [dramatists]." In addition to the pecuniary injustice endured by playwrights, was the indignity they suffered at the hands of the censor. The solution to the first problem was clear: governmental interference into the relationship between manager and dramatist to provide "the same protection [of] . . . the law which is given the writer of a work in any other department of literature." But it was precisely governmental interference which most rankled the author when it came to the subject of censorship. Alluding to the Lord Chamberlain's power of licensing theatres as being "ludicrous," the author goes on to heap scorn on then-Examiner of Plays George Colman,

46 Rev. of Report from the Select Committee, 462.

47 Rev. of Report from the Select Committee, 477.

48 Rev. of Report from the Select Committee, 463.
renowned chiefly for his ingenuity in reconciling an extraordinary freedom of speech in himself as a playwright, with an exceedingly intolerant jealousy of the exercise of a similar liberty on the part of others. The manner in which Mr. Colman has executed the duties of his important trust, has not failed to develop [sic] the extreme inconvenience, to say nothing of the folly, of applying a system which involves the continuance of such a functionary to so enlightened an era as the present. Indeed, there is scarcely a period in theatrical history, since the institution of the office of licenser, in which the influence exercised over that licenser, by the peculiar nature of his power, did not lead to acts worthy of eternal ridicule.49

The attitude of the author is clear. Colman was a hypocrite whose own plays could not pass the ridiculous standard of scrutiny he himself was now imposing on others. Colman was a lackey of the Lord Chamberlain (which was a difficult charge to defend against given that an oath to be loyal to his Lordship was a prerequisite for the job), whom the Review critic asserted had been looking for "[a]n old offender . . . [who] would make an excellent turnkey . . . "50 Colman had been grilled by one member of the committee over his own propensity to violate, as a dramatist, the very standards which he claimed to uphold as Examiner. It was a ludicrous exchange in which Colman attempted, mostly unsuccessfully, to defend himself. In the course of exercising his duties, Colman had excised a reference in which a woman was said to have been an "angel." The committee wanted to know why he had taken offense at such a seemingly innocuous passage.

49 Rev. of Report of the Select Committee, 464.

50 Rev. of Report from the Select Committee, 464.
853. Do you recollect the passage in which that was struck out?—No, I cannot charge my memory with it. I do not recollect that I struck out an angel or two, but most probably I have at some time or another

854. Milton's angels are not ladies?—No, but some scriptural angels are ladies, I believe. If you will look at Johnson's Dictionary, he will tell you they are celestial persons, commanded by God to interfere in terrestrial business.

855. Supposing you were to leave the word "angel" in a play or farce, will you state your opinion as to what effect it would have on the public mind?—It is impossible for me to say what effect it would have; I am not able to enter into the breasts of every body who might be in gallery, pit, or boxes.

856. But you must have some reason for erasing it?—Yes, because it alludes to a scriptural personage.

857. Must an allusion to scripture have an immoral effect?—I conceive all scripture is much too sacred for the stage . . . .

Colman had found religion, but he had found it late in life, and under suspicious circumstances. In his own plays, the questioner had pointed out, he had liberally slipped in oaths when it suited him. When questioned about it, Colman implied that his elevation to high office had sobered him and endowed him with a newfound sense of propriety. "I was in a different position at that time," he had said by way of excuse, "I was a careless immoral author, I am now the examiner of plays" [q. 860].

861. Do you suppose that those plays of yours (which were so pleasing to the public, and are acted still with great success, from which you have not the power of erasing those small oaths) have done much mischief to the morals of the town?—They have certainly done no good, and I am sorry I
inserted the oaths. As a moral man, one gets a little wiser as one goes on, and I should be very happy to relieve my mind from the recollection of having written those oaths.

862. Do you mean to say that you regret being the author of "John Bull"—No, that is a different thing; I might not be sorry to have made a good pudding, but if there are any bad plums in it, I should be glad to have them out.⁵¹

This combination of sanctimony and vanity was too much for The Monthly Review, which was quick to point out the discrepancy "between what Mr. Colman says, and what Mr. Colman does...⁵² Colman, the Review maintained, "cared not a farthing about the effect of a 'damme' on the audience;" he was in it for the money, for the £400 a year salary paid to the Examiner, payment for his "tardy loyalty to virtue."⁵³

The Review critic was not merely taking potshots at Colman, but at the entire system of censorship, which was insulting to the public and, in any event, totally ineffectual. The Lord Chamberlain acted with the authority of the monarch, but he had very little power to enforce his decrees. "Players and managers literally laugh at my Lord Chamberlain, and his jurisdiction," the Review scoffed, "and are just as easily intimidated by his menaces, as the Bishop of London would be frightened by an


⁵² Rev. of Report from the Select Committee, 465.

⁵³ Rev. of Report from the Select Committee, 466.
anathema from Rome.\textsuperscript{54} Actors would say what they would, regardless of the censor's objections, and might even substitute something worse than the original offending passage. Who could stop them? The naked flaunting of the Lord Chamberlain's authority made an ass of the law.

Here, in the same year that saw the first major reform bill, was a most democratic sentiment. For \textit{The Monthly Review} was acknowledging that the law is only as good as the support it receives from the public. The author's argument is muddied a bit because, at times, he does not make clear whether he is arguing against the institution of censorship or merely the ineptitude of the people charged with carrying it out. But there is one passage where he erases all doubt. The idiocy of the censorship was such that it required "but a little combination and energy, to enable all whom it may concern, to cast down the glove of defiance before the Chamberlain, and the learned Panza at his heels, and then we shall see if one of the most barbarous institutions which disgraced ancient times, be now capable of sustaining itself amongst an enlightened people."\textsuperscript{55} The position of \textit{The Monthly Review} was clear: the censorship was an archaic institution run by incompetent bureaucrats to the detriment of the national stage.

These sentiments were echoed by \textit{Chambers's Edinburgh Journal} in a series of articles published between 1856 and 1873. \textit{Chambers's} was not as personal in its criticism as had been \textit{The Monthly Review}. Instead, the \textit{Journal} took an historical approach to the issue in order to demonstrate the folly of what it considered to be "an encroachment

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\textsuperscript{54} Rev. of \textit{Report from the Select Committee}, 467.

\textsuperscript{55} Rev. of \textit{Report from the Select Committee}, 467.
upon the public liberties, by the sovereign . . . . 56 The Journal then proceeded to illustrate its point with a series of anecdotes, beginning with the suppression of John Gay's opera, Polly, in 1728. The language used by the Journal author in describing the incident had a boldly radical tone to it, as perhaps befitted a magazine whose principal mission was to cultivate an educated laboring class.

The arbitrary proceedings of the chamberlain excited, as we have said, general disgust. The indignation of the people was roused by an act of oppression which interfered at once with their own amusements and with the rights of individuals; and on the publication of the opera by subscription, the sympathy universally felt for the author is said to have fully indemnified him for the pecuniary loss he had sustained by the exclusion of his production from the stage. 57

This outrage and "oppression" against "the rights of individuals" was followed by the more outrageous legislation of 1737, a measure which the Journal contended "gave to an officer of the household . . . an even more absolute power than we intrust [sic] to the sovereign . . . ." 58 And to what end? The effect, said the Journal, was an infringement upon the rights of the English people, but with no compensatory benefit. The legislation affected only new plays, which meant that the "filth and obscenity" of older English dramatists such as Wycherley and Congreve was left uncurtailed. At this point, the Journal makes a very telling argument in favor of the nineteenth-century stage:


57 "The Dramatic Censorship and the Proscribed Plays," 313.

If the stage, therefore, has become more pure, the improvement cannot be ascribed to the efficacy of a measure which left all its impurities uncorrected: if at the present day the comedies of Wycherley and Congreve are excluded from the stage, the exclusion is not to be ascribed to the virtuous discrimination of lord-chamberlains or their deputies, but to the refinement—we had almost said fastidiousness—of the public taste.  

The passage is interesting because it reflects so clearly the ethic of "respectability" which the Journal apparently maintained as an attribute of contemporary audiences. The audience implied here was not the mob which allegedly ruled the theatres during the Regency and early Victorian period, but a "refined" group of discriminating theatre patrons whose very presence affected the repertoire of the stage in a most positive way. It is also of interest for its very democratic approach to the whole issue of stage morality. The stage reflected virtue because the nineteenth-century public (unlike its seventeenth-century antecedent) was virtuous. The autocratic Lord Chamberlain was simply irrelevant; Wycherley and Congreve could not be found on the contemporary stage not because they were banned by a paternalistic functionary, but because they were "too strongly impregnated with licentiousness to be tolerated by a modern audience."  

As for the political danger posed by the plays that were actually banned or altered by the censor, this too was nonsense. The author cites references to "[t]ruth, justice, reason, love, and liberty" from Brooke's banned *Gustavus Vasa* (1739), a play far "too

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60 "The Dramatic Censorship and the Proscribed Plays," 314.

deficient in dramatic incident to be effective on the stage . . . [and] much too feeble a production to justify the alarm or to excite the hostility of a government." In another instance, the Journal suggests, the censorship was used more with the ego of the Examiner in mind than with the interests of the state. In Shee's tragedy of Alasco there was a passage which alluded to "some slanderous tool of state./ Some taunting, dull, unmannered deputy." Needless to say, the Lord Chamberlain's "taunting, dull, unmannered deputy" expunged the reference. According to the Journal, that deputy was none other than Colman.63

Colman was, apparently, a favorite target of the censorship's opponents in the press. The legendary Examiner was again the butt of criticism in another article published in Chambers's Edinburgh Journal in 1863. Calling the censorship of the drama "despotic, capricious, and partial," the 1863 essay goes on to quote Lord Chesterfield's defense of the stage during the debate in parliament concerning the Licensing Act. "... If poets and players are to be restrained,"64 the Journal quotes Chesterfield as saying, let them be restrained as other subjects are, by the known laws of the country; if they offend, let them be tried, as every Englishman ought to be, by God and their country. Do not let us subject them to the arbitrary will and pleasure of any one man!"65 Having given an historical basis of its objections, the Journal concluded its second article by declaring


63 "The Dramatic Censorship and the Proscribed Plays," 315.


that "the power of the licenser to suppress any sentiment not in accordance with his party feelings, or expression offensive to his special taste, is inconsistent alike with the spirit of free government and the dignity and independence of dramatic literature." The Journal's opposition to censorship and its implicit defense of the theatre remained consistent for three decades. In 1873, it still decried the Lord Chamberlain's "obnoxious decrees," and proclaimed his "irresponsible authority" to be "somewhat of an anachronism in the present day."

Chambers's Journal was not a publication with much of a sense of humor. The dissemination of so-called "useful knowledge" was a task taken very seriously by its proponents and very rarely lent itself to levity or certainly any sense of irony. But in 1869, George Augustus Sala, himself a scion of a theatrical family, publicly tweaked the nose of the Chamberlain and the censor in a way Chambers's would never have dreamt of. Sala, who claimed no love of the contemporary theatre, nevertheless took

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68 "Dramatic Censorship," 266.
69 See Chapter 5 for more on the concept of "useful knowledge."
70 Interestingly, Sala claimed to have grown weary of the theatre for the very same reasons it was ostensibly becoming so popular among the "fashionable" London set. "Now and again," he wrote, "an urgent appeal is made to me to write to Mr. So-and-so for a box, and with courteous promptitude the ticket I have asked for is sent. Then I have a hurried dinner, attended by I know not what vague odor of violet-powder and warm frizzling-tongs. Then I am deprived of my post-prandial cigar, and am dressed up in an absurd mockery of the attire of an undertaker who has a waiter for a twin brother." Sala also expressed a healthy disdain for "the bald-headed man in the box on the
the Lord Chamberlain to task for having publicly chastised London theatre managers for their alleged lack of circumspection in stage costume. His argument reflects yet another contradiction between the position so often taken in the standard surveys and the reality of mid-nineteenth-century public perception. If not an outright contradiction, it at least illustrates a degree of complexity and ambiguity in middle-class attitudes toward the theatre that has gone largely unacknowledged by historians. Here in the late 1860s, a decade which saw the rise of the West End theatres and an alleged sea-change in attitude toward those theatres on the part of the fashionable classes, we have an author writing for a middle-class periodical who disdains the stage precisely because it has become fashionable. "This 'chickaleary' age," wrote Sala wishfully, "this can-can century, may yet be destined to witness comedies which shall recall the bygone glories of the Rivals and the School for Scandal..."\(^71\) It was in the salad days of Sala's youth (during the great period of decline, yet!), that the theatre had been worthy of patronage, when Vestris played Oberon\(^72\) and burlesques sparkled with the "wit and classical elegance of Planché . . . "\(^73\) The problem, Sala implied, was not the legs of the chorus girls; they were but the symptom of a decline in public taste which favored commercial idiocy over the more substantive (but much less lucrative) entertainments of the author's youth.

\(^{71}\) Sala, 116.

\(^{72}\) Sala, 111.

\(^{73}\) Sala, 115
"plague of leg,"74 as he put it, was illustrative of the negative effects of the audience on
the stage, an inversion of the dynamic maintained by traditional anti-theatricalists.
Ironically, he refers to exactly the type of audience that the managers of the 1830s hoped
would be the salvation of the drama (see Chapter 2).

But there is indeed some ambiguity in Sala’s own position toward the stage, a wistful
nostalgia, perhaps, but a nostalgia tempered with a significant degree of contempt for the
moralism of the Lord Chamberlain:

That the Lord High Chamberlain was wise, handsome, witty, refined, noble, wealthy, and splendidly attired—to say nothing of his
accomplishment of walking backwards on state occasions, a faculty he
shares with his friends the managers, who further add to the feat the deft
art of carrying a pair of lighted candles before Royalty,—of these things I
had long been aware, but I had no idea that My Lord was so Good. How
did it all come about? When did our Sydney first awaken to a conviction
of the glaring improprieties of the costume worn by some actresses and
many ballet-girls, and by a great many more stage-females who can
neither act nor dance? What long-latent feeling of decorum at last surged
to the surface, and impelled his lordship to remonstrate with the directors
of our dramatic temples on the sartorial naughtiness exhibited behind the
footlights?75

Determined to make a mockery of the Chamberlain’s concern, Sala began a very funny
discourse on the subject of female legs and the actresses to whom they belonged. "I have
studied legs lyrical, legs dramatic, legs choreographic, the pride of the age, the wonder
and admiration of contemporaries," wrote the author, waxing satirical—and at times even

74 Sala, 116.

75 Sala, 101.
sexual. Consider the erotic undertones in the description he offers of Vestris, dressed for a breeches role, "in a braided military tunic,—the very waist of the garment . . . a thing to go crazy about, —a pair of undress military overalls with a broad stripe of gold-lace down the seam, and the most ravishing pair of black-satin boots with pointed toes that eyes ever beheld." 76 Or again, another description from bygone days "in which a young lady appears in an undress cavalry uniform, and horsewhips the dramatis personae all round." 77 One cannot help but detect Sala's tongue planted firmly in cheek, in a satirical remonstrance aimed at the prudery of His Lordship, the Chamberlain.

And here again we find another contradiction. If, for Sala, it was the public who allowed the stage to wallow in a "plague of leg," it was also the public, with its "good taste and common sense," that segment of the public that favored such promising plays as those being written by Robertson and the new school, 78 which would prove to be the catalyst in the revival of the British drama. But actually, this is no contradiction for Sala; he is, in effect, speaking of two publics, one common and vulgar, the other an elite group of social arbiters. And so the line of demarcation between the legitimate and the illegitimate, indeed the whole social efficacy of the theatre itself, is, according to Sala's argument, determined as much by the class composition of the audience as it is by the content of the work presented. 79 Again, as in the examples above, Sala's essay is

76 Sala, 105.

77 Sala, 108.

78 Sala, 116.

79 The relationship of audience composition to theatrical legitimacy is explored further in Chapter 5.
ultimately a defense of the theatre against a meddlesome government apparatus and a clarion call for playgoers to seek and support that which represented the "higher" art (in this context, the new comedy of Robertson and his disciples) of the stage.

Given what we know of the empty boxes and dismal houses faced by managers in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the level of support given the theatre as an institution by eclectic middle-class magazines during this same period, it is difficult to deny that the periodical press served as a significant factor in the gradual process of theatrical legitimation that was to continue into the second half of the 1800s. There are, in the reams of paper and the gallons of ink devoted by these publications to the subject of the theatre, any number of aporias, contradictions, and ideological double-binds, and often these are the factors that make for the most fascinating readings. But it is clear that the stage had a friend in the press, however confused the press sometimes appeared to be as a partner in that friendship.

Perhaps the greatest evidence of press support for the theatre came not in the form of an overt defense, but in the sheer amount of space devoted to the profession, its practitioners and literature. Consider, as a case-in-point, Fraser's Magazine which published between 1830 and 1882, and which treated its readership to poems, book excerpts, and articles on such diverse topics as the opium trade in India and the nature of

80 Watson maintains that "failure in dramatic management was all but universal before 1860. With the possible exception of the Haymarket, no theatre was continuously prosperous through this period." See Ernest Bradlee Watson, Sheridan to Robertson: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century London Stage (1926; New York: Benjamin Blom, 1963) 135.
Truth. Fraser's was solidly middle-class and, above all, thoroughly respectable. Between 1830 and 1882 it published dozens of pieces on the lives of actors, descriptions of famous portrayals, theatre history, the great dramatists—past and present, the latest interpretations of Shakespeare, the national drama of foreign countries, and various trivia and insignifica about stage practice. It is safe to say from the example of Fraser's, New Monthly Magazine, Chambers's Journal and their sister publications, that the theatre was an object of considerable fascination and interest. To say that this fascination amounted to an advocacy for the stage may indeed be an overstatement. But the following statement from an 1830 article published in Fraser's would suggest otherwise:

"The stage," Fraser's maintained a few years later, "as a mirror of the state itself, not of public manners only, but of morals—nay, of doctrine and religion—should be jealously cherished." Prejudice against the stage was, as Barish has demonstrated, very much a

81 See the October 1862 issue of Fraser's for articles on both topics. Fraser's Magazine Oct. 1862: 399-418 and 461-472.


part of the Victorian consciousness, but *Fraser's* and its competitors would, by-and-large, have none of it.
CHAPTER 4

ACTORS AND ACTING AS REPRESENTED IN THE VICTORIAN PRESS

If the honor of the stage, at least in the abstract, was largely protected and defended by the nineteenth-century eclectic press, such defensiveness was itself a sign that lingering prejudices remained in the public consciousness even at the end of the century, a time when the theatre had undergone significant social rehabilitation. Throughout the course of the nineteenth century, many theatres did indeed become "respectable" enough for a gentleman to bring his wife or daughter for an evening's entertainment, but this newfound willingness to be seen in certain theatre buildings did not necessarily translate into universal public approval for actors and actresses, whose personal lives were frequently perceived as being shrouded in an aura of bohemian iniquity. Michael Booth points out that favorable attitudes toward the stage led to greater middle-class participation in the acting profession, which in turn led to higher wages at West End theatres and a concomitant increase in working actors which far outstripped the increase in general population. This is also Michael Baker's thesis, who maintains that the

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1 Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 100. Booth gives census figures from 1891 to 1901 which show a 67 per cent increase in the number of working London actors and a 63.5 per cent increase in the number of actresses.
remarkable growth rate [in the numbers of people entering the acting profession] cannot be explained by the natural expansion of theatrical families. It must suggest that women, like men, were beginning to defy the traditional ban upon a stage career and enter the theatre from outside in substantial numbers."\(^2\)

As Baker’s work suggests, this influx of middle-class talent helped serve to legitimate actors as serious professionals and strengthen their claims to respectability among the general public. But the notion of a "general public" is notoriously difficult to sustain, and as Baker himself admits, the newly acquired legitimacy did not fully transcend old stereotypes about stage performers, nor was the public acceptance of actors as full members of "respectable" society any more monolithic than the profession itself. \(^3\)

Tracy Davis has, in her well-received study on Victorian actresses, referred to the ambivalent public attitude toward female stage professionals as a "sexual equivocacy" which prevailed despite "attempts to depict actresses as home-centred, modest, self-respecting females redolent of Victorian middle-class virtues."\(^4\) One of Davis’s seminal points is that nineteenth-century actresses faced special obstacles in the battle for public acceptance, an indisputable contention, given prevailing Victorian notions of womanhood. She is somewhat critical of Baker’s work because of its focus on the highest


\(^3\) Even at century’s end, Baker writes in his conclusion, the profession "remained, and remains, a freak among professional occupations; the process of professionalising actors is not finished even today, and perhaps will prove impossible so long as the essential character of acting remains unchanged. . . . If the actor’s livery is today unobtrusive, thanks largely to the efforts of his Victorian predecessors, the real distinction remains" (174).

\(^4\) Tracy C. Davis, \textit{Actresses as Working Women} (London: Routledge, 1991) xiv.
class of actor and what she calls the "serious drama and comedy" predominating in the West End of London. But it was the distinction that separated the West End actor from his colleagues in the transpontine theatres and East End music halls which perpetuated an equivocacy in attitudes toward actors of either sex, well into the latter part of the 1800s. Indeed, these distinctions were not solely applied when contrasting East with West, but were often strongly asserted with regard to the various gradations of performers within the so-called better class of theatres.

This equivocacy was not lost on some observers. As early as 1821 Blackwood's Magazine attacked the public for "a mass of prejudice" against actors, "as indiscriminating as it is unphilosophical," and reminded its readership that any vices held by performers "have been mainly occasioned by the very severity of the opinion which stigmatizes them." Blackwood's found it difficult to defend the profession without allowing that some of the charges against it were indeed true. But the author turned the table on the critics and levied a rather Darwinian charge. The environment and circumstances of the typical actor were not caused by his a priori moral failings; it was his environment and circumstances which led to the vices. The very fact that actors had been for so long legally classified as vagabonds was reason enough to recognize the character shown by them in bearing up to such severe social disadvantage. As for the actor's vices, Blackwood's did not deny them, but maintained that "these vices are of a

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5 Davis 4.

kind peculiarly obnoxious to those 'wise in their generation,' called prudent people; who, in consequence, more prudently than charitably, keep at too great a distance to find out his virtues."

Years later, the National Review would express similar concerns. "We grant what cannot be denied--," Elizabeth Lynn Linton wrote in 1885, "the untainted character of such and such, the undimmed moral lustre of this supreme genius, the intact virtue of certain of the successful." Linton, of course, refers to the press's fascination with Mrs. Siddons, Madame Vestris, Edmund Kean and other theatrical luminaries whose alleged virtues set them above others in the profession, above "the rank and file who fail in purity—the little people, the second class, the unsuccessful." Henry Irving (who was the subject of a plurality of the National Review's theatre-related articles in the 1880s and 90s) was indisputably regarded as a gentleman, but he and his small coterie of upper-tier theatrical colleagues were the exceptions to an unforgiving rule. "No one touches certain leading names," Linton wrote,

but no one hesitates to sweep into one net of common iniquity all the little people, both those who may be, and probably are, as chaste as snow, and those who have no fame to guild over their lapses; and no money to buy back what they once lost. 'It is impossible,' they say, 'to be an actress and keep your essential virtue. You must hear and see things which will at the very least take the keen edge off your delicacy, tarnish the silver of your innocence; and you will very likely lose more than these. Temptations will be too strong for you, and you will go down into the pit of evil with the rest."

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9 Linton, 15.
A master of the backhanded defense, Linton implied that fame had helped to whitewash hidden "lapses" among even the most publicly virtuous stars, even as she defended the honor of their less illustrious colleagues. On the surface, she argued that the stage was no different from any other profession, but this apology was not without its contradictions. Actresses were required to "obey certain laws of social life" as was everyone else. But would they? Young girls, Linton averred, must "be protected against their own ignorance, their own innocence, their very selves, until they have learnt something of life and its dangers . . . ." To allow one's daughter to go on the stage would be no shame because it was not the profession, but the actress herself which was the guarantor of her own honor.

Here, Linton gives her hand away. The theatre was purified by those who practiced the profession. If the stage was to be made safe for respectable women, it would be respectable women (read middle-class women) who would make it so. "Who will bell the cat of prejudice," she asks in conclusion, "and prove that to be an actress, even not of the first strength, is not necessarily to be virtually a dévergondée? . . . But, once more, who will bell the cat? And if the stable be really Augean, who will undertake to cleanse it? And are the brooms strong enough?" This reads much more like a call to an ideal, than an unapologetic defense of the status quo. I cite this essay because it is a reflection of the ambiguous attitudes shown toward actresses (and actors) by the Victorian public as late as 1885. This equivocacy, as Davis might call it, does not negate claims of a general

10 Linton, 16.
11 Linton, 17.
12 Linton, 19.
trend in public acceptance of actors, but it does illustrate the degree to which that acceptance was tempered by long-held myths and prejudices that were not so easily reconciled with the very real social trends that Baker and others have documented.

A large percentage of the nineteenth-century eclectic press's coverage of theatre-related topics was devoted, not surprisingly, to actors and acting. Not unlike their twentieth-century descendants, the journalists of the last century were fascinated by the notion of celebrity and the mystique of the stage. In the eclectic press, coverage of actors can be divided into several approaches. In the first approach, the actor was examined from an anecdotal perspective. Unconcerned with the actor's craft per se, these pieces devoted themselves to bits of trivia and insignificia about the habits and eccentricities of their subjects, sometimes focusing on particular, well-known performers, and sometimes on "typical" portraits of actors in general. In a second, related approach, the actor was examined from an historical perspective, historicized and offered to the reader through the prism of decades or centuries past. A third approach, that which focused on the actual craft of the actor, was mostly a late-century development, but one which reflected a new respect for the professional skill of Victorian performers. In yet another approach, the actor became the subject of periodical fiction and, as such, literally became the creation of the fiction writer. Since, of these posited categorical subjects, the actor-in-fiction had the most tenuous connection to anything or anyone in the actual Victorian world, it was presumably endowed the most heavily with qualities and characteristics reflecting the biases and prejudices of authors. Since fictionalized accounts of actors can be found in articles which fall under the other three rubrics, I have opted not to treat it under a separate heading.
Trivial Pursuit: Actors and Anecdotes

Even a cursory review of nineteenth-century popular journals betrays the considerable extent to which the authors of theatre-related articles enticed the reader with the trivial details and insignifica of the lives of actors. As Linton's article suggests, there was no shortage of interest in the lives of celebrities such as the Kemble family, Edmund Kean, Macready and, later in the century, Henry Irving. These were the saints of the stage—eccentric at times, perhaps—but never in any sense considered to be disreputable. Mrs. Siddons was an "amiable and highly-gifted woman;" Edmund Kean had weathered agonizing hardship to "restore . . . waning splendour to the drama" with "the force of diction, and the graces of eloquence, [that] were, even at that period [Kean's early career], more vivid than those of many men who then enjoyed theatrical celebrity . . . ." J.P. Kemble "was a great actor, and an eminently respectable man." This sort of treatment may not have been hagiography in the truest sense (these authors were not averse to including some of the more sensational aspects of their subjects' lives), but it did tend to lionize the famous and well-connected.


16 In one historical assessment of the 17-18th century actor and dramatist Colley Cibber, Cornhill Magazine described its subject as a man who "lived in the best society," but allowed that "the best society of those days was unrefined and immoral." See "Colley Cibber," Cornhill Magazine Feb. 1878: 199. But even though "[h]is faults and vices are conspicuous—more so, some readers will be inclined to say, than his virtues; . . . let us not forget how generous he was in his praise, how ready to accept and profit by the criticisms of his enemies, how willing to encourage the genius he was so quick to discover" (200).
A nineteenth-century antecedent of the twentieth-century fascination with celebrity, this was a trend that almost universally refused to consider actors in terms of craft or professional accomplishments, but rather considered them as exotic and colorful inhabitants of the social fringe. "Exotic" and "colorful" are not, of course, necessarily synonymous with "disreputable," but it is interesting all the same to note the verbal machinations that authors frequently employed in order to reconcile their own equivocal notions regarding performers.\(^1\) The line between exoticization and marginalization was often very thin.

In its critique of W.B. Bernard's *Retrospections of the Stage* in 1830, *The Monthly Review* complained of the public's obsession with "the personal characters of players." On the one hand, the Review maintained, it was unconscionable to "dishonour those gentlemen and ladies [of the stage] with very humiliating epithets" and, refusing to profess support for antiquated parliamentary laws which effectively denied first-class citizenship to actors, it denounced "the spirit of obsolete legislation."\(^2\) But despite this seemingly principled defense of a misunderstood profession, the Review was quick to reveal its own set of prejudices. The obsession with the players' lives was, after all, due to the disingenuousness which is the requisite characteristic of the profession. "We

\(^1\) It should be noted that such equivocacy was not universal; there were, during the first half of the century in particular, vestiges of unequivocal hostility to actors still to be found in the press. One *Monthly Review* critic maintained that "actors almost universally, out of the theatre, are an insipid, monotonous, and inferior class, as respects manly and solid acquirements . . . ." See rev. of "The Life of Edmund Kean," *The Monthly Review* July 1835: 348.

"forget," the Review reminded its readership, "that all their claims on our attention arise from the success with which they escape, as it were, from their own identity, and with a wanton perversion of the objects of our regard, we tender our admiration to a man for that which it was a triumph of his professional life to keep out of sight."¹⁹

The assumptions held by the Review concerning the personal habits and general character of actors seemed designed not to persuade its readership to support repeal of anti-theatrical legislation, but to spur a clarion call for the even greater stigmatization of the stage. The theatrical establishment, it said, fostered a

goal to which an irregular ambition, urged by a conceited aversion to the ordinary processes of industrious life, drives many an enthusiastic young man . . . [and] we cannot affect to be ignorant that the records of the lives of such persons cannot conduce to our stock of innocent intellectual recreation, much less to our fund of instructive knowledge. In nine cases out of ten, the candidate for the stage commences as an outlaw from his own family; he is a truant to his books, he is a votary of pleasure, and is only anxious to plunge into a medium of excitement, which is to be his atmosphere during his whole life.²⁰

Such a description might lead the reader to expect sensational or sordid accounts of profligacy. Instead, the Review offered the comparatively tame revelation that theatrical manager Jemmy Whitely accepted meat and vegetables as the price of admission,²¹ and that the famous actor Quin, apparently a great practical joker, once made his dinner guests vomit after revealing to them that the soup he had served was made of boiled shoe

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¹⁹ Rev. of Bernard, 266.

²⁰ Rev. of Bernard, 266.

²¹ Rev. of Bernard, 267.
leather. Indeed, the most salacious anecdote was also about Quin, who once remarked to a noblewoman that he wished to be re-incarnated in the form of a housefly in order that he "might have the pleasure, at some future day, of resting on... [her] ladyship's neck."23

The Monthly Review may have disdained the trend toward frivolous anecdote (Mr. Bernard's life, it said, "has neither events nor incidents to raise it above that of every twenty men we meet within an hour"),24 but it was a trend that would only become stronger as the century progressed. Indeed, it was a trend that the Review itself helped to perpetuate. The very next year the journal published a thirteen-page review of John Galt's The Lives of the Players in which it expressed considerable sympathy and support for the profession.25 This time the Review critic heartily recommended investigation into the lives of actors because he (the actor) had reached "[a] certain degree of mental

22 Rev. of Bernard, 269.
23 Rev. of Bernard, 268.
24 Rev. of Bernard, 267.
25 "Undoubtedly there is not in the whole range of biography any class of characters that is at all to be compared with that of the actors," said the Review critic. "The profession being seldom one of choice, and being only adopted in most instances as a dernier ressort, those who follow it are a set of adventurers, alternately raised to the summit of prosperity, or plunged in the abyss of despair. They command our best sympathies, because they have at some time or other afforded us entertainment by the exercise of their talents, eliciting the exquisite tear or the loud laugh... leaving upon our minds impressions that are not easy to be removed." See rev. of The Lives of the Players, by John Galt, The Monthly Review Aug. 1831: 491.
"cultivation" which served to render "his sensibilities more acute, and constantly stimulates him to a course of action, which, in the lapse of a few years, fills his life with an abundance of strange, and often of highly interesting, events."  

A decade and a half after the *Review* dismissed *Retrospections of the Stage*, and subsequently embraced *The Lives of the Players*, *Bentley's Miscellany* published a bizarre series of articles profiling the lives of actresses who had married titled husbands. The author was a Mrs. Mathews (in all probability actress-manager Madame Vestris) who, paraphrasing Coleridge's pronouncement on wine, declared that honest biography "invents nothing, it only tattles."  

For Mrs. Mathews, the project was not to engage in a whispering campaign of gossip, but to promote the profession of actress as one worthy of respect and of a position in the upper tier of society.

If this was indeed Madame Vestris, it is not surprising that she should have chosen such a project to pursue. She was, at the time she wrote the articles, in between her management of Covent Garden (1839-42) and that of the Lyceum (1847-56), enterprises which were to leave her financially hard-pressed. A woman saddled with what Booth has called "a previously notorious private life," and one who found herself in the rather unusual position (at the time) of being in direct economic competition with men, Vestris had a financial interest in bolstering the public image of actresses.

26 Rev. of Galt, 492.


It was, Mathews contended, a canard perpetuated by "blind detractors that the lives of actors and actresses are consequently and necessarily immoral."

Actors are not supposed to be exempt from the frailties of their fellow-men; their follies, vanities, and vices are in common: but to say that they are more depraved than any other class, is most illiberal and unjust. The wisest and best have encouraged the stage. That 'majestic teacher of moral and religious wisdom,' Dr. Johnson, not only wrote for it, but held intimacy—nay, friendship, with an actor: many divines have also contributed to the literature of the Drama, and held fellowship with its professors. Vice will creep into a theatre, as well as into other buildings made with human hands; and 'where's the place whereinto vile things sometimes intrude not?' However individual prejudice may refuse to admit the public benefit derived from a theatre, that place of concourse and refinement has 'done the state some service,' and which the state acknowledges by its legal sanction and general patronage. To attempt to convince these pseudo-moralists that actors are partakers of the good as well as the bad qualities of our common-nature, would be a bootless task; but to the unprejudiced and fair-judging, a brief counter-statement, while we are upon the subject, may not be deemed intrusive or blameable; and we venture upon the theme, albeit 'unmusical to Volscian ears.'

Theatre people were a microcosm of mainstream culture, wrote Mathews, and "a more orderly set of people . . . [were] not to be found labouring for their weekly pittance in any public establishment in the kingdom." Furthermore, they were demonstrably law-abiding as a class, and those of the highest rank and talent (Kemble, Young) were to be "met with in the best society."

And this is a theme that is reiterated in the National Review some forty years later during a period in which the acceptance of actors in the highest social circles is alleged to


have been complete. In a reply to F.C. Burnand, who ostensibly had charged that "the actor's calling is burdened with a stigma which has always deprived him of social status." John Coleman felt obliged to reply that actors and actresses "will compare favourably, and more than favourably, with a similar number of any particular section of the community, for propriety of conduct, humanity, and benevolence." After all, had not George Canning become Prime Minister despite being "the son of an obscure country actress?" As for the moral quality of the actresses themselves, the exceptions merely proved the rule, and such places as indecent conduct did occur were not worthy of being called theatres.

There are certain places which are honoured by the designation of theatres, which, if called by their right names, would be more correctly described as casinos. There are women who come on the stage to show their diamonds and their fine dresses; there are creatures who court the glare of the foot-lights to enable them to display as much of their persons and as little of their costumes as certain managers will permit. But I refuse to regard them as types and representatives of English actresses.

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31 Actors, said essayist John Coleman, were no more likely to be in trouble with the law or unversed in the social graces as anyone else; yet they were held to a higher standard. "No one," he wrote, "can take up the record of the police courts, any week out of the fifty-two, without finding some offence charged against one or other of the clergy. Yet, notwithstanding this, a publicist would scarcely have the audacity to stigmatize the ecclesiastical calling as one which places its members out of the pale of society." See John Coleman, "The Social Status of the Actor," The National Review March 1885: 25.

32 Coleman, 20.

33 Coleman, 28.

34 Coleman, 21.

35 Coleman, 24.
Coleman's argument was conveniently circular, and his contention that English actors had not historically been marginalized, was difficult to sustain. But like Vestris he was an actor, and his apology was every bit as understandable as was hers, rife as it was with a heavy sense of class-consciousness. The need to defend the honor and respectability of actors (at least some of them) apparently had not lessened since the time of Mathews, who had done her part to legitimize her sisters-in-trade by profiling various actresses who were ennobled by marriage. Presumably such marriages were to be taken as proof of respectability and of the acceptance of actresses into the highest social class. But it is ironic that Mathews chose to bolster her thesis, an argument designed to explode the myth of the actor-as-profligate and the actress-as-whore, with examples from the private lives of women who essentially purchased their respectability with sexual favors. It is not a great leap, as George Bernard Shaw noted some decades later in Mrs. Warren's Profession, from demi-monde to trophy wife.

Nowhere is this irony more pronounced than in Mathews's account of the Duchess of Bolton, Lavinia Fenton, the original Polly Peachum in Gay's The Beggar's Opera. Fenton's talents are mentioned only in the context of their appeal to her admirers.

Not a print-shop nor fan-shop but exhibited her handsome figure in her Polly's costume, which possessed all the characteristic simplicity of the modern Quakeress without one meretricious ornament; and the stage presented her in this style of dress for sixty-three consecutive representations of the same character, when the theatre was crowded in every part by her admirers: indeed, so painfully was she importuned and pursued by her numerous lovers, that it was deemed expedient that some confidential friends should guard her nightly, home after her performance, to prevent her being hurt by the crowd or run away with! 36

Vestris's Lavinia Fenton exhibits herself as though a product on display or as an item up for auction, in a fashion which forty years later would have disgusted the prudish Coleman. A valuable asset that must be protected from those who would "steal" her, Fenton is presented as a commodity whose worth is predicated on her sexual allure. As the "noble occupant of the stage-box nightly . . . [gazes] in undisguised admiration upon the fascinating Polly," the actress's manager begins to see "his treasure escaping." The sexual and proprietary implications of the language are obvious.

Perhaps more significant were those bits of Miss Fenton's story that Mathews did not openly discuss. This was an actress who, in a much less sexually squeamish era, had indeed been labeled as a whore. Hogarth, in one of several versions of a print based on Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, had depicted the actress playing the role of Polly, her arms outstretched, not to MacHeath or to her father, but to the Duke of Bolton, sitting placidly in the audience, notebook in hand. The book might very well have been his ledger of accounts, for Gay maintained that the Duke kept Fenton as his mistress at a cost of 200 to 400 pounds a year. It would take twenty-two years and three illegitimate sons before Bolton would make her an honest woman. Mathews had chosen a challenging subject for rehabilitation.

The Whore/Lady dichotomy can again be seen in a short work of fiction published by *New Monthly Magazine* in 1848. Here a young admirer is ushered into the boudoir of the "young and lively brunette" actress Mademoiselle Léonie, whom the author describes

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almost solely in terms of her physical attributes: "Her eyes were small but sparkling, her nose slightly retroussé imparted an additional piquancy to her countenance, and the extreme whiteness of her teeth bore unqualified testimony to her sparing use of pralines and petits gateaux. Her figure was slightly but symmetrically formed, and there was a playful coquetry in her manner... Mademoiselle Léonie keeps company with the highest of society, most particularly a stately Russian count whose money she freely accepts. The Count has been ensnared "by the potent spell of her charms," despite the fact that he suspects that she has been entertaining the young man in her apartments. When he confronts her with his suspicions, however, Léonie dissembles so convincingly (another example of her iniquitous powers) that the Count sheepishly retracts his accusation even while the young admirer shivers on the balcony.

Again, this description could be dismissed as a relatively early century remnant of an old anti-theatrical prejudice, if not for the fact that the demimonde image can also be found in magazines of a much later period. The idea of the actress as an aesthetic object (and therefore a sexual commodity) certainly did not lose any currency toward the end of the century as evidenced by a series of articles in The English Illustrated Magazine published in the late 1890s and early 1900s. These articles, which featured a preponderance of photographs and short biographical notes concerning stage performers, were weighted heavily in favor of women, and clearly were antecedents of such material as might be found today in People magazine or any other celebrity-oriented popular journal. Although these anecdotal snippets featured an occasional male subject (by a ratio of over four actresses to one actor in the five articles surveyed), they differed greatly


41 Hervey, 290.
in their treatment according to gender. The Illustrated Magazine's coverage of its female subjects was in no way salacious or even suggestive, but it most certainly considered their primary appeal to be decorative and sexual, rather than craft-related. Henry Irving (whose blurb was unaccompanied by photographs) was said to have been educated at Marlborough, prepped for the Bar, and a family man with one son, but Miss Louie Pounds's chief characteristic was held to be "her delicate prettiness." Marie Dainton, profiled in a blurb entitled "Dainton—and Dainty," was "exceedingly pretty, with raven-black hair and a slender figure." Actress biographies as often as not were accompanied by full-length photographs in which they posed in exotic costumes or elegant gowns. The men were not always represented iconically, and when they were, it was most often by a simple head shot. Readers interested in Irving's dimensions and hair color presumably were forced to purchase a ticket and see him in person.

Daintiness and prettiness were, of course, significant aspects of the construction of Victorian womanhood, and so it is not surprising that actresses were to be valued, to a large extent, by their physical traits. Writing again for The English Illustrated Magazine, Austin Brereton describes Ellen Terry with a mixture of aesthetic appreciation for that

42 "Flashes from the Footlights," The English Illustrated Magazine Oct. 1899: 68.


44 "Flashes from the Footlights," English Illustrated Magazine Oct. 1899: 64.

45 The focus on beauty was a rule that had its exceptions. The Illustrated Magazine had little to say, for instance, about Minnie Maddern Fiske's appearance (Feb. 1900: 456.), mentioning instead her considerable intellect, but the obsession with "daintiness" and "prettiness" had no corollary in the discussion of actors.
actress’s sexual appeal and an admiration for those qualities that made her just like millions of other women who were models of middle-class respectability. In his article Brereton quoted Charles Reade’s assessment of Terry:

‘Ellen Terry is an enigma. Her eyes are pale, her nose rather long, her mouth nothing particular, complexion a delicate brick-dust, her hair rather like tow. Yet, somehow, she is beautiful. Her expression kills any pretty face you see beside her. Her figure is lean and bony, her hand masculine in size and form. Yet she is a pattern of fawn-like grace. Whether in movement or repose, grace pervades the hussy. In character impulsive, intelligent, weak, hysterical—in short, all that is abominable and charming in woman. Ellen Terry is a very charming actress. I see through and through her. Yet she pleases me all the same. Little duck!’ 46

Later, Brereton himself says that "Miss Terry's figure, at once graceful and commanding, and her singularly sweet and expressive countenance doubtlessly aid her much . . ."47 So Terry's sexual allure was for both Reade and Brereton one of her chief qualities, but not one which in any way cast doubt upon her character. She was, in Brereton's view, an excellent mother and her relationship with her granddaughter was "pretty and touching." As a homemaker, she excelled also, her London home reflecting "in every single article—furniture, pictures, books—the innate taste of the artist and the gentle feeling of the woman."48 And so the fusion of art and respectability came in the form of the perfect female.


47 Brereton, 235.

48 Brereton, 240.
If Brereton made such claims for Ellen Terry he did not quite go so far as one Mrs. Jeune, an essayist for the same illustrated journal, who had implied several years earlier that the stage not only attracted the most wholesome class of young women, but that it was actually responsible in large part for the wholesomeness of budding actresses. Mrs. Jeune had made this claim in a spirited defense of the employment of children by theatre managers. In a nation that had so recently undergone drastic labor reforms,\textsuperscript{49} the notion of child labor in the theatres had sparked some criticism, and Mrs. Jeune had come to the defense of the managers. Her argument, aside from the contention that the children were well-treated and not overworked, rested upon the premise that the stage was an ideal breeding ground for young ladies. The girls employed by Drury Lane, for instance, were well-educated, well-fed and well-protected, and as a result were "better grown and set up, their chests more expanded, and their little arms and legs much more muscular than the run of ordinary children."\textsuperscript{50}

So a talented young girl of twelve or thirteen who aspired to be an actress could fulfill her dream at Drury Lane and enjoy an expanded chest in the bargain. But this was not all. They would also learn to be young ladies of the highest quality. This was due in part, as Jeune admitted, from the social background of the girls the theatres were likely to attract--"children of respectable people who are devotedly attached to them, and who look after them as carefully and jealously as any parents of the upper classes . . ."\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{49} In 1875 the Disraeli government had pushed through Parliament a series of acts favoring the working classes. The Employers and Workmen Bill held employers legally responsible for any breach of contract with laborers; the Trade Union Act lifted a number of restrictions on union activity; and the Factory Act set the work week at a maximum of 56 hours.


\textsuperscript{51} Jeune, 8.
mothers of the girls were "nice, respectable, healthy-looking women, who, having been connected with the stage as well as their husbands, let their children follow the same profession." As for the charge that stage-life was a bad influence on children, Mrs. Jeune insisted that the opposite was true. These girls received a better education by their tutor (in the case of Drury Lane this was Madame Katti Lanner), than they would otherwise have had in a normal school setting. "I fail to see," wrote Jeune,

how it [conventional schooling] is very much better than the control exercised over the little dancers by the kind women who are responsible for them during their stay in the theatre; and the personal acquaintance of teachers in the Board schools with their pupils is certainly not a bit more intimate than Madame Lanner's with hers. Whatever harm the children may suffer from going on the stage, I am sure they do not learn it at the theatre, for the reasons I have just given. . . . And if we take the number of women and children engaged in theatrical life for the last twenty years, I am confident that the stage would hold its own for having educated and employed as many honest and pure women as any of the other professions in which they are engaged.53

Jeune's point was clear: young girls in the service of the stage became reputable and respectable young ladies, ideal Victorian women, "honest and pure."

If these ennobled actresses, aristocrats of the stage, French demimondes, fan magazine idols and fledgling dancers were either objects of desire or, in the case of the latter, simple admiration, it is not too far-fetched to say that actors in general were, if not sexually commodified, very often exoticized in the press. This exoticization was almost never malicious--actors were most often portrayed as being colorful, but essentially

52 Jeune, 9.

53 Jeune, 11.
harmless—but it was often bizarre, to say the least. T.P. Grinsted's interest in actors apparently had very little to do with any question of craft, except to note that the best and most noteworthy of actors were those who shunned mere popularity for the higher satisfaction of playing to the elite, "the discriminative few, to that necessary minority which comprises the well-cultured and thoughtful section of his audience . . . ."54

Significantly, Grinsted contrasts the respectable Alfred Wigan with "the transpontine Hicks," who quite clearly suffers by association with his East End public.55 But this is as close as he would get to any analysis of craft. His concern was to promote the notion of a dramatic college, the principal purpose of which was to provide for aging and retired actors. Grinsted's project, of course, was a reflection of the increasing professionalization of acting which had begun to take root by mid-century, and a sign of the respect that had begun to be afforded the profession within middle-class circles.

And yet there remained a distinct element of the exotic and bizarre in Grinsted's argument. Several years earlier he had penned a similar article for Bentley's in which he seemed to mount a defense of the stage on the basis of its reported health benefits. Theatrical life, he had written, was erroneously thought to be generally unhealthful, with its late hours and its many temptations to sinful living. This was not so, said Grinsted, because a disproportionate number of septuagenarians and octogenarians were actors—circumstantial evidence that a life on the stage was conducive to health and vitality. Actors were special, as evidenced by "those old disciples of Thespis [who] retained much of their juvenility, appearing to argue that a man may not grow old unless he likes."56


55 Grinsted, 514.

And so actors were shown to be respectable, but still possessed of a certain mystique and a charmed life which drew vigor from the stage. This meant conversely that the actor was dependent upon the stage for his charmed existence. Habituized as he was "for long years, night after night, to this aggregate of welcome sights, this concourse of sweet sounds, the actor that has to leave the boards finds himself dismissed to forgetfulness and gloom." Moreover, the invigoration afforded by the stage to its practitioners extended also to the audience:

For this we owe them something. Many of us can go back to our youth and exhume its buried pleasures, among which would be seen visions of the theatre, the stage peopled with those whose voices had grown so familiar that they almost seemed to us our own. We have encountered an old favourite in after-days, and our boyhood seemed returned to us. Charles Lamb used to remark that he never passed the pit-entrance to old Drury without shaking some forty years off his shoulders, and bringing back the memorable evening of his first visit thereto—the evening of pleasure, which since had never visited him except in dreams.

On one level Grinsted was at least concerned with the profession of the stage, albeit after a rather unusual fashion. But many who professed an interest in acting had little to say about the actual craft. In 1841, Fraser's professed great enthusiasm for actors, proclaiming them to be "indubitably the legitimate property of the public." Fraser's was not, however concerned with actors as public figures, but with their "manners,

(1856): 97.

57 Grinsted, "Of Old Actors," 509.

58 Grinsted, "Old Actors–A Reverie at the Garrick Club," 98.

habits, and even their foibles," which were "of a natural justifiable interest and inquiry to the world." It was a sentiment that would eventually become the rallying cry for most twentieth-century tabloids.

... no true estimate of the man can be formed from an acquaintance with the actor; it naturally and reasonably becomes a question of some concern, what he really is when his 'lendings' are 'off,' and he returns unto himself; and an inquiry ensues as to how he comports himself with his family and friends: how he eats, drinks, sleeps, walks, talks, when he has no part to play: whether he is what by outward show he appears—namely, a thing of flesh and blood, with appetites, passions, amusements, griefs, and gratifications, in common with his fellow-men; and whether, like them, he is possessed of organs, dimensions, senses, affections; fed with the same food; hurt with the same weapons; subject to the same diseases; healed by the same means; warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer;' or whether he is in fact a thing of 'shreds and patches;' a soulless being formed and set apart for the mere purpose of amusement to dull humanity.

With these somewhat purple questions, Fraser's had set up a straw man and was now prepared to knock it down. Having raised an artificial question, the author then gave the obvious answer:

The speculation is, indeed, at once delicate and interesting, touching the real nature, feelings, and faculties out of the scene of their histrionic excellence; and it is no mean boast in the writer of these remarks that he has crossed the very threshold which has divided the 'curious' from their insight to the private natures and pursuits of public performers; and having passed the Rubicon, plunged into the very heart of their mystery, he now


offers up to his constant readers the conclusion to which his personal observations have brought him—namely, that actors, however they may seem in public, are merely human beings! 62

Whatever the author's intentions here, and they are at this point unknowable, it is still possible to speculate on the impact this treatment had on Fraser's readership. In a feat of rhetorical gymnastics, the author had at once both demystified and exoticized his subjects. Actors were ordinary human beings it was claimed, susceptible to the same ordinariness as were other respectable people. At the same time, they were different, objects of curiosity to be examined by a justifiably inquisitive public. What the public actually discovered in the pages of Fraser's about actors may or may not have satisfied their appetites for private tidbits, but the magazine's revelations were extremely tame and not particularly titillating, even by Victorian standards. The comedian John Bannister unintentionally absconds with his friend's false teeth; 63 George Frederick Cooke takes to the bottle ("his one occasional infirmity"); 64 John Kemble gently humors an upstart bit player who aspires to the company's leading roles. 65

Much of the anecdote written about actors was of this singularly unsensational kind. This in itself is significant; sensation and notoriety were the antitheses of the Victorian ideal of respectability and to present the biographies and deeds of actors in such a

quotidian and even banal fashion, was to implicitly acknowledge that actors and theatre artists were sufficiently uninteresting (and untitillating) enough to merit the attention of those in good social standing.

Descriptions of actors, their manners and habits were also influenced by class considerations. As the world-at-large was divided into a social hierarchy, so was the theatrical world. John Kemble and Henry Irving were often treated differently by the press than their lesser colleagues, in part because they were stars, but also because it was easier to treat the lesser performers as an unindividuated mass about which broad generalizations could be made. All The Year Round's treatment of supernumeraries did not concern itself with any particular actor, but with supernumeraries in general. The super, claimed All The Year Round, was a stupid lout, held in low esteem by the play-going public, an automaton who understands neither the play or the role which he performs:

To him the tragedy of King John is but the occasion on which he and his fellows 'wore them tin pots on our 'eads,' Julius Caesar the play in which 'we went on in sheets.' 'What are we supposed to be?' a curious 'super' once inquired of a more experienced comrade. 'Blessed if I know,' was the answer. 'Demons I expect.' They were clothing themselves in chain-mail, and were 'supposed to be'--Crusaders.66

In fairness, this was probably an accurate assessment of many supers, given the huge casts and elaborate pageantry favored by many actor managers throughout the latter half of the century. Managers hired their extras in bulk, for little money, and it is doubtful that much thought was given to any qualities that would make them suitable for the stage in any way other than as ornamentation. And it is important to note that the description

66 "The 'Super,'" All The Year Round 6 April 1872: 441.
offered by *All The Year Round* in no way impugned the character of lesser performers. They were colorful and amusing, but they were in no way the scoundrels historically described in most anti-theatrical diatribes.\(^{67}\)

The universe of the actor was, as *Chambers's Journal* maintained in 1858, one removed from that of ordinary people; the very title of the article—"The Theatrical World"—suggested something mysterious or wondrous, a separate universe accessible only to its initiates. It also drew sharp distinctions between the social classes of the theatre and of the entertainments offered. Here *Chambers's* offered a portrait of the unscrupulous country manager, whom "in nine cases out of ten . . . is a mere adventurer, with little or no education, low-bred and vulgar, with bullying manners, and a tendency to oblivion in all pecuniary transactions."\(^{68}\) This sort of manager runs a theatre (in the article it is the Theatre Royal, Slopperton) which founders several weeks into its season, despite the town's intelligent and theatrically inclined population. The theatre itself, situated in a desolate part of the city, is dirty and ill-kept, "with a repellent poverty-stricken air," and worn-out sets and properties. Shortly after the commencement of the season, the manager disappears with no forwarding address and the leading lady, a woman of bovine proportions, is found stuck in a window after a failed attempt to leave town without paying her rent.\(^{69}\)

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\(^{67}\) There were, however, theatrical scoundrels depicted elsewhere in the press. In one mid-century account it is the manager of provincial company that cheats his patrons and his actors. Significantly, he is Irish and fits perfectly the profile of the typical comic stage Irishman. See "A Provincial Manager," *Once A Week* 7 March 1868: 208-10.

\(^{68}\) "The Theatrical World," *Chambers's Journal* 24 July 1858: 54.

\(^{69}\) "The Theatrical World," 54.
But Chambers's makes clear that this operation did not reflect the better class of theatres and managers, who were, for the most part, respectable businessmen. The better class of country manager and "the respectable country actor" showed a keen appreciation for the "greater theatrical world" of London and would often visit its theatres. At this point Chambers's struck a blow for the legitimate drama at the expense of other entertainments. The "country manager of the old school," wrote the essayist, showed a pointed disdain for the great variety of amusements that passed themselves off as theatrical. Glancing at an issue of The Era, the manager notes with disgust "the manner in which the actors and actresses of the present day advertise and puff themselves, and how men, who are but fourth-rate actors in a second-rate London theatre, pretend they are stars of the first magnitude in the provinces." The manager is especially offended by the term "professional," which appears with great frequency in the Era advertisements. For him, it is the professionalization (or pretense to) that has given rise to the many bastard forms of entertainment so inimical to the welfare of the true art. Said Chambers's,

He likes better the old word comedian or actor; 'professional' includes, he thinks. All sorts of horrors, such as niggers, bounding brothers, antipodeanists, and equestrian troupes. 'Ay, ay,' says . . . [the manager] to himself over his pipe, 'no wonder we managers can't make our salt now,' with such entertainments surrounding us on all sides. Here is no end of concerts and exhibitions, where the public not only get amusement, but beer as well. What theatre, I should like to know, can stand against beer?"  

70 "The Theatrical World," 55.  
71 The Theatrical World," 55.  
The country manager's conception of professionalization was a strange one, but it reflected the very same hierarchical consciousness and economic anxiety exhibited by managers and actors who would testify against the privileges of music halls 34 years later during the Select Committee hearings of 1892.

In any event, these distinctions between performers can not be reduced to a polarity between the established star of the London stage and the ordinary actor. The country manager featured in the Chambers's piece was no one in particular, but he was clearly on the side of the angels as far as the author was concerned. In fact, some accounts took pains to accord the rank-and-file of the theatrical world with an almost genteel industriousness. As early as 1821, Blackwood's Magazine found itself defending actors who have "been bent down under the weight of much illiberal and much absolutely unfounded prejudice." Actors, Blackwood's maintained labored under almost impossible expectations. Errors of conduct that would be overlooked in most people were, in the actor, "perpetually liable to observation. . . . [and] [t]he pecuniary difficulties of the actor are doubled by the circumstances of the profession."73

These "pecuniary difficulties" could only be weathered by persons of determination and character. In one mid-century essay about a provincial company—ostensibly written by one of its actresses—great care was taken to describe the performers in ways diametrically opposed to the conventional anti-theatrical notion that actors were shiftless, unfocused vagabonds unfit for meaningful work. These vagabonds were hard workers, businesspeople and risk-takers who doggedly persisted in spite of conditions unfavorable

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to their enterprise. Each member of the company paid their own traveling expenses\(^75\) in addition to being assessed for the expenses of production.\(^76\) They acted as their own business managers, scouting locations and making arrangements for lodging. Inadequate performance and dressing spaces posed numerous problems. In one town the actresses shared a dressing room that was "about the size of a sentry-box," and could only be used by one person at a time. The men had to cut through the audience to get to their dressing area, and everyone had to lend a hand in shifting scenery.\(^77\) After enormous outlays and much hard work, receipts could be bitterly disappointing. "We were in excellent spirits on the opening-night, in expectation of a crowded house;" the author wrote about one small-town engagement, "but our hopes were blighted, the receipts amounting to four shillings only!"\(^78\) In the face of these hardships, the actors persisted, models of industry and capital—in short, imbued with the very qualities that made possible the emergence of the new capitalist class.

Two other additional articles, published almost two decades apart, illustrate the work ethic of struggling performers even further. In another testimony in favor of the purity of young actresses, Chambers's offered the story of "The Young Actress," in which an ingenue must quit the stage in order to marry an enterprising young man. A "rising talent" whose "grace and loveliness attracted admiration,"\(^79\) the ingenue is under contract


\(^{76}\) "Small Stars in the Provinces," 466.

\(^{77}\) "Small Stars in the Provinces," 470.

\(^{78}\) "Small Stars in the Provinces," 466.

to pay a forfeit of 10,000 Francs should she break her contract with her manager. At first the manager is in no mood to forgive the forfeit, his theatre being in a precarious financial state. But when she appears again in his office with the 10,000 francs, her fiancé's life savings, the manager relents. Having struggled in vain to light his fire, the manager asks the young actress to place a piece of paper in the grate to feed the smoldering embers. The paper is, of course, her signed contract. "Thanks to me, you are free;" he tells her. "[A]nd thanks to you, I am giving my hands a good warming." The stage here is represented as being an unsuitable environment for a married woman, and yet she herself is a paragon of purity and integrity; the manager a selfless and compassionate benefactor.

Eighteen years later, Cornhill Magazine offered an historical essay on John Richardson, a late eighteenth-early nineteenth-century showman famous for his theatrical booth at Bartlemy Fair. By 1865 fairs were becoming a thing of the past, and for decades the booth theatres that were part of that tradition had held little prestige within the theatre community. Richardson, however, had been quite successful over the course of his long life and when he died, left an estate of £20,000. The Cornhill article was an interesting mix in which the author emphasized Richardson's allegedly rustic and bumpkin-like qualities (marking him as a "colorful" character), while at the same time imbuing him with the same respectable qualities that Chambers' Journal attributed to the genteel, but impecunious, actors in the provincial company mentioned above.

That Richardson was portrayed as a rustic is obvious. When asked his opinion of actor William Macready, Richardson replies, "[n]o, muster . . . I knows nothing about

80 "The Young Actress," 172.

him; in fact, he's some wagabone [sic] as no one knows; one of them chaps as ain't had any eddication [sic] for the thing; he never was with me, as Edmund Kean and them riglars [sic] was." But Comhill took pains to depict his enterprise as an honorable one, an enterprise that had historically been undertaken by well-connected and respected actors (Fielding for one) "of good repute." Richardson, the author wrote, had abandoned his business as the keeper of a public house to become a traveling showman and, despite several points during his business career during which he was at the brink of destitution, made a considerable fortune.

Richardson was not above the occasional flim-flam. When large crowds awaited outside his booth, he was known to cut short the performance already underway (a practice known as a "John Audlcy") in order to bring in a fresh audience with ready money. But he worked hard and expected his actors to do the same, at times requiring them to perform twenty-one times a day. He was honest and paid his actors fairly, having given one an unsolicited five-shilling-per-week-raise because of the actor's prodigious lung capacity. Salaries were punctual every Saturday evening; he was "remarkably temperate," tolerating no drunkenness in the company, and upon his death.

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82 "The Old Showman," 715.
83 "The Old Showman," 714.
84 "The Old Showman," 715.
85 "The Old Showman," 715.
86 "The Old Showman," 719.
87 "The Old Showman," 721.
he bequeathed large amounts of his fortune to his employees. Richardson, like the hapless supers in *Chambers' Journal*, was an exotic specimen, but he was also the model of a productive, enterprising and honest citizen.

Fifteen years later, the same enterprising spirit is attributed to provincial actors but a point of view a good deal more ambiguous than might be expected so late in the century. "The Stage Jewel," a work of short fiction published by *All The Year Round*, appeared in 1880, at the dawn of the golden age of the St. James's and at the peak of what Baker's work suggests was the era of the respectable actor. In this story, a young provincial girl falls in love with a traveling provincial actor whom she sees performing the role the dashing romantic hero, Algernon Monteagle. She eventually marries the actor and becomes part of the company and subjected to a life of onerous hard work. "They talk of the idle, vain, and frivolous existence led by actors," says the young girl, who also narrates the story, "I only wish they could have seen me—a poor young creature of seventeen, unaccustomed to work—toiling with hands, heart, and brain during the whole day long in preparing for heavier toil at night." Her husband, too, is imprisoned in a profession that exacts a demanding toll:

Gradually . . . [the] incessant toil in his profession began to tell upon his nerves and constitution. Of all the trials incidental to the poverty of a poor profession, none are so terrible as those to which the strolling player is subjected during his weary struggle for existence. The absence of all hope of change for the better, and this conviction in spite of the most splendid talents—for it is the conviction of genius misunderstood which is common to the whole brotherhood, from the pompous manager himself down to the

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88 "The Old Showman," 722.
poor drunken wight who lights the lamps, sweeps the stage, and plays the 
victimised policeman in the pantomime—makes the lot of the poor 
strolling player the hardest of all.89

In this description, the player who lives on the margins of theatrical society endures a 
poverty brought about, not by indolence or poor character, but by a social system and 
public which fails to reward him for his efforts. Unlike Richardson, who reportedly made 
(and lost) several fortunes while laboring in the trenches, these poor benighted thespians 
would never realize a decent wage.

Still, even in this portrayal, which comes so late in the century, there is a stigma 
attached to the subjects not found in many earlier articles. The glamour of the stage, 
which first so intrigues the young woman and which leads her to marry the young actor, 
is symbolized by the stage jewel so prominently mounted on the leading man's cap. But 
just as the glamour of the strolling life soon proves to be an illusion, so too, does the 
stage jewel prove a worthless piece of colored glass.90 There is in this story a residual 
distrust of the theatre and its practitioners that survives despite its attempt to absolve the 
actors from responsibility for their lowered condition.

Saints and Martyrs: Historicizing the Actor

The Richardson piece, like the anecdotes of Cooke, Quin and others, was a 
reminiscence, a retrospective look at an actor who had passed from the scene decades 
before. The nineteenth-century periodical press commonly offered such retrospectives 
and more often than not, the depictions took a sympathetic view of actors that recognized 


90 "The Stage Jewel," 516.
past prejudices and bordered on advocacy. In 1893, for instance, *Cornhill Magazine* published an article in which it gave account of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century actors buried in or "beneath the shadows" of Westminster Abbey—the resting place not only of Royalty, but of the luminaries of the British establishment.\(^{91}\) It is difficult to imagine that this was in any way a conscious strategy, but by historicizing the social position of actors the press was, consciously or no, using the past to rethink the present. Again, there is no intent to claim any sort of systematic strategy on the part of a monolithic press. Examples amidst the evidence of contradiction and aporia are certainly to be found, but advocacy for actors, implicitly and explicitly expressed, was a recurring component of nineteenth-century press coverage and its significance cannot be denied.

"In ancient Greece," proclaimed *Chambers's Journal* in 1864, the profession of an actor was reckoned most honourable, as one by which mankind was instructed in great and important truths, whilst, at the same time, the imagination was gratified, and the moral character elevated."\(^{92}\) And so the *Journal* invoked the authority of antiquity to make its case that the profession of the actor was not only honorable, but was of vital importance to the commonweal. The actor was the bearer of truth and a builder of character, an unequivocal statement of support for an historically reviled profession. This was going beyond the claim that actors could do no harm; this was a claim that they were essential.

That this was not an isolated example has been illustrated above and in Chapter III, but in the case of many historical accounts of actors, support came in the form of a play for sympathy, an acknowledgment of the bigotry and prejudice held against actors in the past and the burden of the attendant hardships. For *Chambers's Journal*, the chief

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\(^{91}\) "Actors and Actresses in Westminster Abbey," *Cornhill Magazine* April 1893: 373.

historical offense against actors had been at the hands of the Puritans during the
seventeenth-century Protectorate. The Puritans meant well, said Chambers's: they were
"[g]ood men and true," but they were led to "frenzies of intolerance." The goodness and
trueness of the Puritan fathers was almost immediately called into question, as the
judgmental language used by Chambers's attests:

[the Puritans] held that they were doing only what was sound, and wise,
and right, when they made ruthless war upon poetry, and painting, and all
the refinements and graces of life, denouncing them as scandals and sins,
ingodly devices, pernicious wiles of the author of all evil; when they
peremptorily closed the doors of the theatres, and dismissed actors,
authors, managers, and all concerned to absolute starvation.  

Here it is actors that represent grace and refinement, and it is the actor's enemy, the
historical Puritan (and perhaps also by extension the sectarian enemies of the Victorian
theatre) that are life-denying and cruel. The enemies of actors comprised "a
sanctimonious sect," that "held views of human nature 'more practicable in a desert than a
city, and rather suited to a monastic order than to a polished people.'"  
There was, of
course, no real moral comparison to be made between seventeenth-century Londoners
and those of the late nineteenth century, a point Chambers' made clear when it allowed
"for the licence and grossness which the times permitted," but the "drama suppressed by
the Puritans was of sound and wholesome constitution, rich in poetry of the noblest class.
It is sufficient to say, indeed, that it was the drama of Shakespeare and his
contemporaries."  
But still the point was clear: actors and the drama affirmed the


94 Isaac Disraeli, quoted in "The Drama Under Difficulties," 103.

95 "The Drama Under Difficulties," 104.

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human condition in the most positive of ways. It is fair to ask what resonances such a spirited defense of seventeenth-century actor/martyrs would have on a nineteenth-century readership and to what extent such an argument would be interpreted as a defense of contemporary practitioners.

Cornhill Magazine, too, had come to the defense of long-dead actors, those who had been assailed by Stephen Gosson, William Prynne and Oliver Cromwell. The author had addressed the arguments of Gosson and Prynne in some detail, and in a rather contemptuous tone. Prynne, particularly, had made his anti-theatrical arguments from silence and in such an obvious and heavy-handed way, it seems strange that any nineteenth-century author would have bothered to refute them. For Cornhill, Gosson was "a little man" whose bitterness toward plays and players stemmed from having had his own dramatic work "speedily and irrevocably condemned." Prynne was castigated for having condemned the publication of over 40,000 plays in the two years prior to the publication of his Histrio-Mastix.

96 Prynne was a favorite subject of anecdote, although not everyone assailed his personal character. Grinstead called him "a man of lofty principle and of stern integrity," but allowed that Prynne's treatise had "severely libelled" actors. See "The Theatres of London," Bentley's Miscellany 36 (1854): 90.


And so on. As Prynne, Gosson and the anonymous pamphleteer were treated with contempt by the author of the Cornhill article, so the actors were treated as almost martyrs and certainly as objects of sympathy. The decree of 1647, in which actors were threatened with whippings, fines and imprisonment was called "as uncivil a document as ever proceeded from ruffled authority; and the framers clearly considered that if they had not crushed the stage forever, they had unquestionably frozen-out the actors as long as the existing government should endure."  

Many of these unfortunate performers, the author reported, took military service with the Royalists, and served with distinction. It was at this point that the article took a stand for the actors and the theatre at the expense of less legitimate entertainments. For Cornhill, the greatest insult given the actors during the Protectorate was that lesser and ruder forms of entertainment than the legitimate theatre were allowed by law. "If Shakespeare was driven from Blackfriars and the Cockpit, was it fair to allow Bel and the Dragon to be enacted by dolls, at the foot of Holborn Bridge?" Later the author takes a shot at Cromwell himself, "who would not tolerate the utterance of a line from Shakespeare, expressed from the lips of a player," but was more than content to be entertained by "buffoons" at his daughter's wedding.

There is a keen attitude of condescension here toward performances which fell outside the author's conception of legitimate theatre, and toward Cromwell for not having had the aesthetic sense to recognize the value of the art of players over that of "buffoons."

100 "Frozen-Out Actors," 171.


103 "Frozen-Out Actors," 176.
In this historical allusion, the author may have been drawing an analogy between the illegitimate entertainments of the seventeenth century and those of the nineteenth, with Cromwell and his preference for the "low" art of buffoonery an indication of aesthetic imperception. In one article published late in the century, *All The Year Round* makes a similar comparison between the music hall and theatre of the nineteenth century and the hodgepodge of entertainments offered just prior to 1642, "when the line had not yet been drawn between the legitimate drama and the 'sketch,' and when the law knew no difference between dramatic representation and bear-baiting, cock-fighting, and the like."\(^{104}\) Here the Puritans come off as philistines because their lack of discernment leads to the unfortunate laws in which "acting is classed with bear-baiting, cock-fighting, cudgelling and 'other unlawful assemblies.'"\(^{105}\)

Poor Cromwell. His reputation and that of his Puritan brethren suffered another blow when *Once A Week* repeated an old, and thoroughly unsubstantiated, story which maintained that the Lord Protector had been, of all things, a frustrated actor, having appeared in a morality play during his days as a student, either at Sidney College or at grammar school. Prophetically, the story has Cromwell playing one of the five senses, which contend with each other for the possession of a crown.\(^{106}\) The story is suspicious because it is so conveniently prescient, but author Dutton Cook apparently could not resist the temptation to lead off his profile on amateur actors with such a notorious example, following it with others "more satisfactorily ascertained."\(^{107}\) Even if the story


\(^{105}\) "Some Old Dramatic Difficulties," 136.


\(^{107}\) Cook, 203.
were true, Cromwell would hardly have been pleased with Cook's main project, which
was to give examples of socially prominent people who had at one time esteemed the
stage so highly as to become actors themselves. The sons and daughter of the Earl of
Bridgewater had performed the original production of Milton's Comus and Queen
Henrietta Marie had participated in masques, indirectly leading to the loss of Prynne's
ears. George II had celebrated an important military victory at Drury Lane and George
III studied rhetoric and elocution with Quin.

Two years after the publication of this article, Comhill would take its case for actors a
step further. By 1867, actors were no longer simply martyrs or demonstrably respectable
people; they had been canonized. It was not enough to depict them as the hapless victims
of political circumstance and the capriciousness of an intolerant theocracy, but a case for
their essential goodness, if not godliness, was now to be made. The magazine cited
Shakespeare's contemporary, Edward Alleyn, who had written a letter to his distraught
wife during a time of plague. Alleyn had evidently encouraged his wife to put her trust in
God, to keep her house "fair and clean," and to remember that God helps those who help
themselves. Alleyn, being safely removed to the countryside, perhaps had more
reason to trust in God than did his city-bound and plague-exposed wife, but his religious
sentiments out-puritaned the Puritans.

According to Comhill, Alleyn was not, as an actor, exceptional for his devotion. The
ancient Sts. Genesius, Gelasius and Pelagia, all of whom had been actors, had converted

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108 Cook, 203.

109 Cook, 204.

to Christianity during the persecutions of the Roman Empire. Given the anecdote about Alleyn, the presumed point of which was to demonstrate the compatibility of religion with the actor's profession, these examples were strange choices. Genesius was put to death by Diocletian for his ostentatious conversion to Christianity,\footnote{Ostensibly he converted in the middle of a performance for the Emperor Diocletian.} Gelesius was stoned by his public for having abandoned the stage for his new religion, and Pelagia voluntarily quit her profession for a life of prayer in Jerusalem. In the latter cases, the stage is voluntarily abandoned in order to practice the faith, hardly a ringing endorsement of the stage or an example of the compatibility of piety with performance.

Still, it is likely that is exactly the point the author intended to make with these anecdotes. The beautiful medieval dancer Kummernitz was so devoted to the Virgin that she prayed to become unattractive to her many suitors in order to remain chaste. The Blessed Virgin complied by giving her a full beard,\footnote{"The Saints of the Stage," 432.} a miracle that destroyed her career, but saved her virtue. Centuries later, Betterton would prove himself exceptional by selflessly adopting the daughter of the man who had impoverished him.\footnote{Betteron lost his fortune after a shipwreck wiped out the whole of his investment in a mercantile venture. "The Saints of the Stage," 437.} Cornhill's list of anecdotes was long. The real question has not so much to do with the actual saintliness or religiosity of actors, but more with Cornhill Magazine's motives for making the case for saintliness in the first place. It is true that just about any topic (that wasn't considered scandalous) was fair game for Victorian periodicals, and there was always a sense of arbitrariness and inexplicability about the subjects chosen for publication--from the moral qualities of the French to the carelessness that men exhibit in choosing their
wives. But it is difficult to imagine that any magazine at any time during the century would have sparked reader interest with an article about the saintly activity and religious piety of factory owners or barristers. In the act of proving the moral extraordinariness of actors, the press had again exoticized them.

**Actors and Craft**

The anecdotes about actors found in the press during the nineteenth century were, as previously mentioned, to a great extent relegated to stories concerning lifestyle, habits, management conflicts, social triumphs and trivia—in short, to almost everything except the craft of acting itself. The nineteenth century was a period in which English dramatic criticism came into its own, a period which fostered the careers of such luminaries as Leigh Hunt, George Henry Lewes, Clement Scott, William Archer and, of course, George Bernard Shaw. But nineteenth-century British dramatic criticism and, more specifically, discussions concerning individual performances, were largely a function of reviews, the sheer number of which necessitate preclusion, with one or two exceptions, from this study. Reviews of specific performances were rare in the pages of weekly and monthly magazines, and when they did appear, they mostly took the form of historical retrospectives, or were occasioned by the odd production marked by some unusual characteristic. In 1861, for instance, the French actor Charles Fechter mounted a production of *Othello* at the Princess's Theatre which provoked a lively debate in many journals concerning his allegedly misplaced naturalism and French sensibility. But even in that case, the debate largely took place within the newspaper press.

And for those magazines which did cover the controversy, the Fechter imbroglio was the exception, not the rule. Indeed, the early and mid-nineteenth century saw very little coverage of acting and performance craft in magazines and journals. It is in the later part of the century that the subject begins to be touched upon with any degree of regularity, a
trend fueled, no doubt, by the expansion of theatres, the professionalization of the field, and what Baker notes as a growing tendency, peaking at the end of the period, toward greater fraternization between actors and journalists. If "craft" can be more loosely defined, not solely as technique but as all the practices that engage the actor in the course of his work on stage (make-up, the use of stage convention, etc.), then perhaps the press can be said to have been more attentive to the subject prior to the late 1860s. In any event, as the field became professionalized, magazines and journals began to devote more space to substantive trends and issues surrounding actual practice.

As always, there are exceptions to this general statement, exceptions that run counter to comfortable and established historiographical assumptions. In the case of Blackwood's Magazine, a literary periodical which published throughout the century, there was substantial coverage of London theatre productions in the late teens and twenties, but a sharp dropoff in such stories at mid-century—precisely the time during which the London theatre enjoyed rapid expansion and actors were beginning their alleged ascent toward middle-class respectability.

Again, it is interesting to note the praise with which Blackwood's, a periodical devoted mainly to printed literature, reserved for the acted drama—at a time many historians consider to be the nadir of the British theatre. In January of 1818, the magazine initiated a series of columns on the London theatre scene, proclaiming that a

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114 Baker maintains that this fraternization came about because "a growing number of members in both occupations from the 1860s came from well-educated, professional backgrounds," and cites R.E. Francillon's confession that "it was really impossible to be a journalist, critic or novelist at this time without knowing some people on the stage" (164).
"great commercial city without an acted drama, would be like a world without a sun," and in a standard defense of the theatre as a source of social correction and ideal example, declared it to be an indispensable "influence on the real refinement of a nation." On the other hand, Blackwood's did not always show as much appreciation for the actual productions it reviewed as it did for the acted drama in the abstract. Its very first notice, following upon the heels of its lofty defense, was something of an anti-climax as the critic admitted he had "but a poor account to give the drama of London this month."

Of course, much of Blackwood's criticism was of a literary bent (it bemoaned the fallen state of dramatic literature), and its critic openly admitted he knew little about the subject of actual performance. "In one word then," he said by way of preface to his first review,

we are not CRITICS [sic]. We have no theories to support, — no established set of principles to write from,— no critical statute-book, by which to try and judge of every thing and every body [sic] that comes before us. We are accustomed to feel a great deal oftener than to think; if we have succeeded in keeping the source of our feelings pure, one of them will always be worth a score of thoughts, especially when passion is the subject on which those feelings are to be employed.


117 In a fit of purple prose, the Blackwood's critic proclaimed that the "altars [of dramatic literature] have been thrown down—the incense scattered—the shrines polluted and profaned—and the golden images, broken in pieces, to be mixed up with earth and dross. . . ." See "Notices of the Acted Drama in London," No. VII, Blackwood's Magazine Jan. 1819: 443.

In other words, Blackwood's eschewed critical rigor in favor of a fuzzy criteria based on an emotional response to the actor's "passion," an oft-used early and mid-nineteenth-century critical term which was rarely clearly defined. But despite the distinct lack of rigor, it is important to note that from this somewhat stodgy literary periodical there came the surprising admission that the most gratifying, the most compelling component of the national drama was not the literature, but the genius of the actor. Mrs. Siddons was, for the Blackwood's critic, "taken for all in all, the grandest and most glorious specimen of a human being that was ever created," Edmund Kean was "a gallant vessel sailing on the ocean of Shakspeare's genius."

But beyond mention of Kean's Romantic tendency toward individuation of character and away from the neo-classic ideal, there was to suggest that the reviewer had any quantifiable criteria by which to appreciate Kean's craft. The text is a litany of praise, vague enough to mean almost anything the reader might wish it to mean. Kean's "passion seems to be the very food, the breath, the vital principle, of his mental existence;" This is a generalization, and there are exceptions. George Henry Lewes was one mid-century critic who was very precise in the use of the term. Lewes's physiologically based, and rather reductionist, view of "the passions" is treated at some length in Joseph Roach's book on scientific paradigms and acting theory. See Roach, The Players' Passion (Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1985) 181-94.


histrionic powers reflected "a perfect unity of purpose." and his work exhibited "that real and sustained mental dignity which springs from lofty and intense feeling." The Blackwood's critic, as unrigorous as his criteria may have been, inferred a primacy to the actor which quite probably mystified or annoyed a readership more inclined to the library than to the boxes at Drury Lane.

But these were reviews, not manifestos or articles on craft per se. In that sense, Blackwood's gave its readership very little. But when it did, the magazine did not shy away from defending actors even when they were accused of violating a text. When, for instance, one actress was criticized for abandoning the conventional interpretation of Lady Teazle in Sheridan's The School for Scandal, Blackwood's came to her defense against charges that she had violated the author's intentions. The actress, Miss Kelly, had played Lady Teazle as a rustic instead of a sophisticated lady of fashion, thus raising the ire of one critic who claimed the part to be "wholly out of her line." This in turn raised the ire of the Blackwood's critic, who responded with a lengthy analysis of Sheridan's text which concluded that Miss Kelly had, in fact, been more in line with Sheridan's intentions for the role than was the traditional interpretation. It was, not surprisingly for a literary magazine, essentially a literary-based critique, but one which recognized the primacy of representation with respect to the drama and one which treated the actor and her craft with respect. Adherence to precedent was for lawyers, not actors, and variety in representation was not only inevitable, but desirable.


124 "Notices of the Acted Drama," No. IV, 77.


126 "On Cant in Dramatic Criticism," 203.
Blackwood's concluded the article with a blast at those who saw the acted drama as a corruption of a literary ideal. Actors should be left to their innovations, and "genius, for once at least, would be freed from the degrading bondage that, in this department, has been for some time settling upon it; and the rights and privileges of The Stage would be asserted . . ."  

Blackwood's orientation toward and appreciation for actors was an anomaly. Critical reviews aside, very little was written about the actor's craft before late mid-century and even so, the definition of "craft" must be stretched considerably in order to categorize it as such. Chambers's Journal published a number of articles in the last half of the century, most of which dealt with ancillary aspects of the actor's craft. In one such article, David Garrick, Mrs. Woffington and a handful of other stars of the past are studied, not for their histrionic skills, but for the ways in which they used make-up. "[M]aking-up," said Chambers's, "is but a small portion of the histrionic art; and not, as some would have it, the very be-all and end-all of acting."  

And yet, during a period when the profession of acting becomes ever-more professionalized and respectable in the public eye, and which gives birth to those acting techniques that would become the bedrock of contemporary practice, Chambers's reduces Charles Mathews legendary skill as a character actor to his facility for "the art of making-up and disguise."  

Within some of these articles on seemingly ancillary aspects of stagecraft, the author or authors revealed a very narrow bias in favor of what they considered to be realism. It is

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127 "On Cant in Dramatic Criticism," 205.


difficult to see how they could have been expected to retain any other bias given the overwhelming stylistic tendency of the times, but it is worth noting the ways in which that bias emerged. In one pedantic article on stage wigs, Chambers's duly notes the laxity on the part of Restoration actors in complying with "correctness of costume," not as a convention, but as a flaw. Garrick's refusal to "reform the costume of the stage" was attributed to the public's intolerance for change, as though an intransigent group of philistines had barred Garrick from the true path of historical accuracy in costume.\textsuperscript{130} Even the contemporary stage was not without its intolerable discrepancies. "The light comedian still indulges sometimes in curls of an unnatural flaxen, and the comic countryman is too often allowed to wear locks of a quite impossible crimson colour," noted the essayist,\textsuperscript{131} but practices had much improved and gone were many of "those discrepancies of hue and texture which at one time were so very apparent, disturbing credibility and destroying illusion."\textsuperscript{132}

Chambers's was, however, extremely appreciative of the actor's art, and, in one article, blasted a certain type of snob who looked to the past as a golden age of the profession, "the connoisseur in whose eyes the Art of the Past is alone worthy of respect."\textsuperscript{133} So too did it lambaste the theatrical know-it-all who demeaned the actor's craft with frivolous criticisms "in the feeblest and most dilettante fashion . . . ."

\textsuperscript{130} "Stage Wigs," Chambers's Journal 15 June 1872: 104.

\textsuperscript{131} "Stage Wigs," 107.

\textsuperscript{132} "Stage Wigs," 108.

\textsuperscript{133} "Theatrical Talkers and Doers," Chambers's Journal 7 May 1870: 538.
Chambers's respect for actors went beyond an appreciation of talent and toward a recognition that the mastery of the craft was the product of onerous hard work.

Ah, if this Talker did but know how much of study, and labour, and experience it has taken to fit this actor whose performance he criticises to take his place on the stage as an audible, visible, intelligible exponent of the part which he has undertaken to embody! If he knew this, surely he would speak a little more respectfully and a little more diffidently in criticising his victim's performance.

How very much has the professional actor to understand, and how much to do, before he can be looked upon as capable of fulfilling his vocation.  

In this passage is reflected the growing sentiment in favor of rigorous actor training, a school for dramatic art which would serve as a training ground for the theatrical elite. It was a mark of the increased respectability afforded by professionalization. Professionals, such as barristers or military officers, could not get by on pure "genius" or mystique. To excel in these professions required a rigorous discipline. So too did the profession of the actor, whose "genius" could now be seen as simply the starting point upon which a training program could build. Proper schooling, the mark of the professional, could now be the line of demarcation between the true artist and the amateur or bohemian interloper.

In the 1880s The Nineteenth Century published two articles which took up the question of professional training for actors. One of these was in dialogue form, a debate between two friends, Millbrook and Haughton. It was a debate which could very well have taken place between a Neo-classicist and a Romantic at the beginning of the

134 "Theatrical Talkers and Doers," 539.
Haughton is skeptical that acting can be taught, but Millbrook believes that art is dependent upon rules and guidelines that must be studied. For Haughton, experience is the best teacher; for Millbrook, experience without training reinforces bad habits. Haughton fears that a school of dramatic art would lead to a practice not unlike the French Conservatoire system in which actors would fall into "certain well-understood effects by certain given means, which are always the same, and are . . . irritatingly monotonous."

I know the precise pitch of key in which the impassioned lover will plead his cause; I know exactly how his hands will tremble, and how he will shake them in the air and beat his breast. Nothing that he does is unexpected. His motion is regulated by given rules, and, except in cases of real talent, these seem never to be departed from. An Englishman, with the same amount of capacity, will perhaps be a less competent actor all around, but he will have more freshness, more individuality.\textsuperscript{135}

Millbrook responds by calling the French "eminently gesticulative," in their ordinary lives, a trait not shared by Englishmen, who "have no formula."

It is doubly necessary, therefore, to teach Englishmen how to move and how to articulate on the stage. If the student have any natural gift, instruction will not render him conventional; but it will place the implements ready sharpened in his hand wherewith to incise the character he conceives upon the spectator's imagination.\textsuperscript{136}

It is clear that Millbrook is the raisonneur, as by the end of the dialogue Haughton is forced to admit that his opponent argues well. More significantly, both men agree that acting and the drama are of such importance to British culture that a national theatre is

\textsuperscript{135} Hamilton Aidé, "A School of Dramatic Art," \textit{The Nineteenth Century} April 1882: 567.

\textsuperscript{136} Aidé, 568.
warranted. For Millbrook, a training ground for actors would be the springboard for such an enterprise, and at the end of the dialogue he encourages "every one who has the higher interests of the drama at heart to contribute something towards the education of the acolytes who are to serve its temples."\textsuperscript{137} Millbrook's argument also reflects the growing interest in psychological realism, and his defense of formal training forshadows Stanislavski.

How many of the numerous ladies, whose ambition it is to appear as Juliet, have any idea of examining the character psychologically, of pulling the speeches to pieces, and finding the exact key of each? This is what the greatest French actress that ever lived did, though she was, in other respects, an ignorant and ill-educated woman.\textsuperscript{138}

Even so, the reference to the French actress's ignorance and poor education seems a throwback to the image of the bohemian and disreputable eccentric. But both Millbrook and Haughton draw a distinction between the lazy shirker who takes to the stage for a life of ease and the true artist whose devotion to craft is every bit as intense as any other professional. Haughton believes in the old stock company apprenticeships, but he also believes in the rigors of the craft. His contempt for the amateur, even the well-bred amateur, is apparent when he claims that acting is a calling "which should be a very serious one . . . [but is instead] regarded by this effete confraternity only as a means of gaining two or three pounds a week with the smallest amount of labour." Millbrook agrees, and maintains that the rigors of a school for dramatic art would "be a stumbling block to the indolent and the flabby . . . ."\textsuperscript{139} In this way, both Millbrook and Haughton

\textsuperscript{137} Aïdé, 571.
\textsuperscript{138} Aïdé, 570.
\textsuperscript{139} Aïdé, 569.
are able to divorce the "true" actor from the interloper, creating a protective sphere for a profession besieged by unworthy aspirants. It is a reminder that the process of professionalization is one which limits and excludes, even as it defines the parameters of membership.

In the very next issue, F.C. Burnand argued against the idea of an academy even though he acknowledged that the stock companies (those that remained) would not provide an appropriate environment for "an educated young lady who wishes to adopt the stage as a profession." His solution was that "[e]ach theatre should be a school of dramatic art." Of course, by "each theatre" he did not mean "any theatre;" such a mission would be entrusted to reputable West End houses such as the Lyceum, the St. James's, or the Haymarket. Pupils would pay a fee to apprentice; they would learn and rehearse a variety of parts under the tutelage of experienced stage managers, and rehearsals would be conducted as they would with full-fledged professionals.

Here again, and very late in the century, there is a vestige of old anti-theatrical prejudice inserting itself into an argument which otherwise is sympathetic to actors and the theatre. The profession must have been considered suitable for an "educated young lady" to enter, or Burnand would not have made his proposal in the first place. His scheme would "afford the opening so much needed by young women of good birth and education, who would go on the stage if they could be assured beforehand that their professional surroundings would be respectable." And yet, the theatrical world was not an environment in which an aspiring actress could be left unchaperoned. "Only under the

140 F.C. Burnand, "A School For Dramatic Art," The Nineteenth Century May 1882: 753.

141 Burnand, 756.
greatest safeguards can a young lady attempt to adopt this quasi profession," Bumand maintained, asserting that the " veneer of respectability" at some theatres was a thin cover for a spirit of "Bohemianism." The obvious question was why Bumand would entertain the notion of well-bred girls taking to the stage at all if the theatre's appearance of respectability was indeed such a sham. Clearly he had not reconciled this contradiction for himself.

But Aïdé was interested in promoting the professionalism of the theatre and was less fixated than Bumand on the quality of the stage's moral environment. In his article he had promoted the dramatic academy as a means to exclude the "effete confraternity" of no-nothing amateurs whose pretensions to the stage, combined with a distinct lack of training, fed the notion that actors were "indolent" and "flabby." But the rise in the numbers of middle-class amateurs could also be viewed as a sign that the actor had at last arrived in upper middle-class society. In the 1860s, Percy Fitzgerald wrote fondly of his memories of private theatricals in those years when his family had summered by the seaside. "There is nothing more charming," he wrote, "than a bit of airy and elegant comedy, done by clever and competent ladies and gentlemen ...." The amateur socialite-actor actually had an advantage over the professional, maintained Fitzgerald, because "good breeding and refinement is sure to tell" when performing a drawing-room comedy. Implicit in this statement is the notion that professional actors were not well-bred or refined. For Fitzgerald, the pursuit of the theatre was entirely respectable even if

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142 Bumand, 756.

some of its professional practitioners were not. Even so, this was a marked improvement in attitude over Jane Austen's stern disapproval of private theatricals in Mansfield Park (see Chapter 2, pp.31 and Chapter 3, pp. 72).

Twenty years later, as Aïdé's dialogue suggests, the social currency of the professional was much improved and it was the amateur, refined or otherwise, that suffered in comparison. In 1898, Aïdé again penned a piece for The Nineteenth Century, this time taking a much more direct swipe at well-heeled, but incompetent amateurs. Again, Aïdé wrote his piece in the form of closet drama. This time, the characters are Miss Woffington Oldfield, a professional actress, and Mr. Jarvis, a theatrical amateur. Unseen in an offstage bedroom, is Miss Woffington Oldfield's niece, Kate Oldfield, whose habit of leading on young men is distasteful to her aunt. Kate has consented to play the balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet with Mr. Jarvis "for the private theatricals at Brandenburg House." But when he arrives at the Oldfield home to rehearse the scene, the younger actress is in bed with a cold and refuses to come out. Intent on teaching her niece a lesson, the aunt consents to rehearse the scene herself, which drives the younger Oldfield to jealous distraction.

It would be a frivolous story if not for Aïdé's larger point. Mr. Jarvis is an interloper, a gentleman amateur with no real business on the stage. He is not very bright, and arrogant enough to suppose that Shakespeare requires very little rehearsal. When he suggests that he and Kate rehearse without looking at one another, her aunt wonders aloud how such an arrangement could lead to a productive rehearsal, with no "passion—

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no heat . . . " Jarvis is confident that passion will come to him on the night of the performance. On that night, he assures her, "you will see. I shall be hot enough. Why, when I act, my pulse quickens—my brain throbs—my hand is on fire!"

Throughout the dialogue, Mr. Jarvis displays an astonishing lack of technique and a complete inability to analyze his text. He has "played with half the amateur clubs in London," and believes his elocution to be "very good indeed." But when, in the course of rehearsal, he advances toward Juliet like a lumbering bear, Woffington Oldfield stops him in his tracks. "Your legs are meant for motion," she reminds him, "not for emotion, Mr. Jarvis. Let your voice steal out those beautiful words in a tremulous whisper!" He does not take direction well:

J. (repeats in a whisper). 'See, how she leans her cheek upon her hand!

(Then, forgetting himself) O, that I were a glove upon that hand,

(Waxes louder) That I might touch that cheek!'

Miss W.O. Heavens! You say it as if you were going to box her ears! If I had a glove upon this hand, I think I should box yours! You talk like a prize-fighter about the glove! Have you no sense of the tenderness—the passion—the yearning rapture of those words?


146 According to the author's footnote, the dialogue was inspired by a conversation he had overheard between Fanny Kemble and a young, aspiring actor. See Aïdé, "A Lesson In Acting," 760.

147 Aïdé, "A Lesson In Acting," 762.


Again, the distinction between the true professional and the respectable, but incompetent dilettante is very clear. And even Fitzgerald had, in 1867, remarked on the essential incompetence of even the most well-born amateurs, those "obstructive bulks of humanity" addicted to the "almost Indian self-transformation" afforded by theatricals.\textsuperscript{150}

It was Madge Kendal, sister to playwright T.W. Robertson, who produced an analysis more prescient than either Fitzgerald or Aïdè. Amateurs, wrote Mrs. Kendal, were neither the bane of the theatre nor the sole key to its newfound respectability, but they did represent a key truth about the relationship of the late nineteenth-century British theatre to its public. Intimate involvement on the part of so many members of the public with the profession may have led to a lessening of the theatre's mystique, and most amateurs were, in point of craft, slavishly imitative of established stars, but, in the final analysis, avocationists had actually performed a great service for the stage. The middle class had injected new blood into the drama and their "personal intercourse" had "entirely swept away the thousand little cricks and prejudices, which at one time existed..." It was the amateur, maintained Kendal, who had "in great measure, opened the eyes of this section of the public."\textsuperscript{151}

"This section of the public" was, of course, the "respectable" middle class. Kendal does not directly acknowledge it, buts she certainly implies a central truth: the middle-class had not "come back" to the theatre; they had co-opted it and effected a social conflation of public and practitioner. This Kendal implicitly acknowledged when she spoke of those "actors and actresses who, instead of keeping to their art, take to Society, and are more known for where they go in Society than for their work upon the stage. . . ."

\textsuperscript{150} Fitzgerald, 444.

venture to say that it is a slight hit against some members of my profession who make Society a vehicle for the stage, instead of making the stage a vehicle by which to make Society respect them."\(^ {152}\) We have met the public, Kendal seemed to say, and they are us.

If there was a single figure in the latter half of the nineteenth century who represented the gentleman-actor most strongly in the public mind, it was, arguably, Henry Irving. His knighthood in 1895 is viewed by many historians as a watershed in the legitimation of the stage, the first such honor to be bestowed upon an actor in that century, and the first in a series of knighthoods which would eventually include other "gentlemen" of the stage such as John Hare, Johnston Forbes-Robertson, and Herbert Beerbohm Tree. But decades before Irving accepted this honor, his standing with the public was very high. In the press, it was Irving who symbolized, indeed almost personified, the respectability of the stage. From the mid-1870s until the end of the century, it was he who was drawn upon most often to be the spokesman for his profession.

Irving's standing is especially apparent in The National Review and The Nineteenth-Century, the two late-century periodicals which were perhaps most concerned with acting theory and technique. This is not to say that coverage of Irving and his career was always favorable, but there was no doubt, at least with respect to these two magazines, that he had become the standard by which theory and practice could be measured. As early as 1877, The Nineteenth Century commissioned Irving to author a series of commentaries on Shakespeare. Throughout the series Irving offered not a scrap of biography or a single anecdote. Instead he gave his readership a very detailed script analysis of a number of scenes from Shakespeare, an indication that The Nineteenth Century took a strong

\(^ {152}\) Kendal, 449.
interest in the drama as a blueprint for performance, and not merely as a literary text. Moreover, Irving gave his readership a detailed analysis based on very specific questions. In the May 1877 issue, he undertook to decide whether Hamlet or Ophelia, in act III scene i, have any idea that they are being watched by the king and Polonius. Irving used the text to find the answer, and his method would meet with approval from any teacher of text analysis today:

I would suggest as the natural and desirable course of things, in order to limit in the most probable manner Ophelia's share in the transaction, that after Polonius says to her 'Walk you here,' his words, 'Gracious, so please you we will bestow ourselves,' should be spoken to the King aside. If this be so accepted, there is no other evidence that Ophelia was fully possessed of the nature of the plot, though she knew that the interview with Hamlet was devised. The words addressed by the King to the Queen previously, in explanation of this plan—

Her father and myself (lawful espials)
Will so bestow ourselves, that, seeing, unseen,
We may of their encounter frankly judge—

do not sound as if intended to be heard by Ophelia, and suggest that it was part of the project to observe both the lovers unawares. 153

As careful as was to justify his choices with specifics from the text, Irving did not hesitate to argue that necessity permitted the actor to ignore the text when warranted. Two years after his analysis of Hamlet's meeting with Ophelia, he would actually argue for the supremacy of the actor's judgment over that of the playwright, even when that playwright was the British national poet. "The practical difficulties in the way of a literal conformity with the text offer complete justification for an actor's departure from it," he

wrote. "It is not a question of violating the poet's ideal, but of choosing from amongst certain effects those which will create the most vivid impression." Here Irving argues that the ideal of the poet is immaterial to the necessities of the stage, a stance which very likely gave many of the literary devotees of Shakespeare fits.

One of these was B. Brooksbank, who, writing in The National Review several years later, took Irving to task for a failure of poetic imagination. Brooksbank argued that first-rate actors were those with a gift for "poetic acting," by which he meant an almost pre-Romantic neo-classic approach that could convey to the audience "the highest heaven of the art." Brooksbank, an unreconstructed neo-classicist, was a man who must have felt out of place in the theatrical world of the late nineteenth century. His passion was for the idealism of tragedy, and Irving's individualized characters, with their personal quirks and idiosyncrasies, were unworthy of tragedy. For him, Irving was, at best, a melodramatic actor. His Richard III was infused with a "melodramatic gift [that] made the actor conceive and express the agony of the King in his tent, when the warning ghosts appear, as if a second Matthias of the Bells had come upon the scene." The following year, Irving was again roundly criticized in the same magazine for a failure to understand Diderot and his Paradoxe sur le Comédien. Even for his critics, Irving was the standard by which the stage was measured.

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155 B. Brooksbank, "Mr. Irving as a Tragedian," The National Review July 1883: 678.

156 Brooksbank, 679.

157 Brooksbank, 683.

158 J. Ramsey, "Mr. Irving and Diderot's Paradox," The National Review March 1884: 7-
By the end of the century, Irving was indeed the actor of the moment, a gentleman-scholar of the stage who epitomized the sense of respectability and professionalization surrounding actors and actresses and which Baker has written about in his extensive study. And while there is much to criticize about the kind of historiography that can summarize whole decades of theatre history as belonging to particular actors or personalities ("the age of Kean," or "the era of Vestris," etc.), it is also valid to point out that nineteenth-century press coverage of the theatre was often guilty of the same tendency. The emphasis placed by the press upon such West End luminaries as Irving is not so much evidence of an "Age of Irving" as it is of the press's own role in excluding from the theatrical chronicles of the time all that did not fit (music hall sketch artists, East End melodrama actors, etc.) into the artificially narrowed parameters which defined its conception of actors and craft. In its exclusion from coverage of those whose performances were seen in music halls and transpontine houses, of provincial players, and of the great majority of actors who were not West End stars, the press had literally defined the theatre as the exclusive domain of the Irvings, the Kendals, the Bancrofts, the Terrys and the Trees. The respectability of the theatre had thus become the product of a rhetorical construct promulgated, as much through omission as direct assertion, by the periodical press.

It is critical to remember that the evidence presented here can never be considered as "raw" or "objective" by the historian, any more than can the transcripts of the Select Committee hearings (see above, Chapter 2). The positions, the arguments, the assumptions contained in the articles examined for this chapter reflect rhetorical

108. Irving had written the preface for Walter Pollock's English translation of Diderot's work.
strategies, and therefore it must be remembered that they were but responses to antithetical positions, arguments and assumptions which were very much in the intellectual ether of the time. In May of 1885, Hamilton Aïdé again penned an article for The Nineteenth Century and defended the actor's calling against an attack by the same F.C. Burnand who had argued against the notion of a national academy for actor training several years before. It is worth noting that among the charges he defended against was that actors were "deficient in critical judgment and literary taste," \(^{159}\) and that "the stage is not regarded generally as a profession."\(^{160}\)

Even if something of the old stigmas remained, the image of the actor had been significantly rehabilitated by the century's end, and the magazine press played a large part in that rehabilitation. If actors retained an aura of eccentricity, they had also gained standing within respectable society as hard workers, disciplined professionals and exemplars of middle-class virtue.

\(^{159}\) Hamilton Aïdé, "The Actor's Calling," The Nineteenth Century March 1885: 522.

\(^{160}\) Aïdé, 523.
CHAPTER 5

RATIONAL ENTERTAINMENT, MUSIC HALL, AND THE WORKING-CLASS SPECTATOR

The actors and actresses so vigorously profiled in Victorian magazines were, as has been mentioned, mostly those fortunate few who achieved fame on the boards of the licensed, legitimate theatres, and, later in the century, the well-known luminaries of the West End. Scarcely a mention is made, at any time during the period, of the illegitimate houses, of the East End, the gaffes, the music halls, and other so-called working-class entertainments. That the working class should be all but invisible in the middle-class press's coverage of the theatre is not surprising given the rhetorical machinations of those theatre artists and managers who strove so eagerly in the parliamentary hearings to distance themselves from their colleagues in the East End (see Chapter 2). The working class and those "illegitimate" entertainments associated with working-class recreation (enjoyed also, in truth, by middle-class slummers and by those patronizing similar entertainments made socially acceptable by a presence in the West End) indeed are all but invisible, but not completely so, as this chapter will demonstrate. For in the music halls and East End houses, in the illegitimate venues of the early nineteenth century, the

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Victorian bourgeoisie confronted the "other" and while there was not nearly the space devoted to these entertainments as was to the legitimate drama and its practitioners, what did find its way into print allows significant insight into the heart of Victorian paternalism.

For it is a sense of paternalism which characterizes and unifies the Victorian middle class better, perhaps, than anything else. It was a paternalism which in part came from the sense of superiority engendered by the dizzying pace of technological and economic growth which was the basis for Bourgeois expansion. This sense of optimism, this belief in an inexorable progressivity, moved Matthew Arnold to remark that culture can be described

as having its origin in the love of perfection: it is a study of perfection. It moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good. As, in the first view of it, we took for its worthy motto Montesquieu's words: 'To render an intelligent being yet more intelligent!' so, in the second view of it, there is no better motto which it can have than these words of Bishop Wilson: 'To make reason and the will of God prevail!'

Raw individualism breeds anarchy, wrote Arnold, and that is why we need the state, the community which enforces "a principle of authority, to counteract the tendency to anarchy which seems to be threatening us."

This tempered optimism is reflective of the way in which, as Walter Houghton has pointed out, "the Victorian consciousness—and especially the subconsciousness—was

1 Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy, ed. Ian Gregor (1869; New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971) 34.

2 Arnold 67.
haunted by fear and worry . . .”

Arnold's glowing and progressive view of the purpose and possibility of culture is, in the final analysis, delivered under a cloud. There are dark forces, he implies, which must be controlled, forces which, because they threaten our evolutionary ascent, must be defined and destroyed. And so the notion of "otherness"—the threat to community and identity—intrudes into Arnold's argument.

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that something of Arnold's argument, his watchfulness and sense of guardianship, informs the testimony of many of the pro-theatre (as opposed to pro-music hall) witnesses at the parliamentary hearings of 1892. For Arnold, too, was at heart concerned with "legitimacy," albeit in a broader sense than were the fin de siècle theatre managers, critics and hangers-on who appeared before the select committee in that year. And so, also, is there something Arnoldian about those who in 1832 saw the legitimacy of the theatre as contingent upon category—lions and horses vs. Shakespeare. In truth, the years between 1832 and 1892 saw a major shift in the way legitimacy was defined. In 1832, the legitimate drama was that which played in a legitimate house. But by 1892 it becomes clear that it is the audience itself which determines the legitimacy of the production. A sketch in a music hall loses its legitimacy, not so much because it is an illegitimate category, but because it is performed in a working-class music hall for working-class audiences. In the years between the select committee hearings, there is a shift in concern among the guardian class—from a conviction that bad drama has a bad effect upon the audience to one in which a bad audience threatens the drama itself. "It is too much the custom," wrote Frasier's in an argument against allowing music halls the privilege of offering the regular drama, "to seek [the causes of dramatic decline] . . . entirely behind the curtain, and to omit any

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search for them in front of it. If the actors are without training... the audiences are without knowledge and discrimination."

Sketches, the subject of so much controversy in the second half of the century, ceased to be theatre (or art) precisely because they were presented in houses that cater to audiences whose members' class affiliation represented an ominous and dangerous threat which had to be controlled. In turn, as the final example given in this chapter will show, the music hall audience was seen by some as an almost separate and distinctly undesirable class from their lower-middle class and proletariat cousins who favored the theatres of the East End.

This chapter will examine the ways in which the press facilitated a distinction between the legitimate or "high" art of the theatre and those entertainments which were considered to be outside the parameters of serious artistic endeavor, particularly music hall. In the early years of the century, the defenders of high art were largely limited to those whose interest in the drama was confined to a literary appreciation, armchair critics whose chief complaint was against the theatre itself as an ineffectual vehicle for the representation of great dramatic literature, or the nabobs of nostalgia whose central concern was the "decline" of the drama and the alleged superiority of Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists over contemporary authors. Monthly Review, for instance, remarked on dramatic talent which "has evanished from amongst us, and that, with some exceptions, which are felt to be so rare as only the more forcibly to prove the general assertion, our age cannot even take a second rank in this department, compared with the reign of the older dramatists." The London Magazine went so far as to declare that it would be pleased to offer "a very entertaining account" of the drama every month, "if

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5 Rev. of The Provost of Bruges, Monthly Review March 1836: 397.
there were no plays acted all year. But, as some artists have said of Nature, 'the Theatres put us out.' The magazine press of the first half of the century is rife with pieces on the merits of Marlowe, Heywood and other long-since-dead dramatists. These may be better treated by literary historians.

The thrust of this chapter is not concerned with literary, but with class distinctions. Articles on music hall, East End theatres and other amusements of the working classes were the exception, not the rule, and therefore constitute a much smaller body of work than those articles pertaining to mainstream, West End actors and theatres. While articles on the poor, and the proletariat, their neighborhoods, institutions, and working conditions were published within the eclectic press on a regular basis throughout most of the period, Bourgeois interest in the lower orders did not extend very far into the realm of theatrical entertainment. What does exist, on the other hand, affords an insight into the ways in which middle-class writers (and by extension, presumably, a significant portion of the middle class in general) were able to maintain the definition of "art" or "legitimacy" within conspicuously middle-class parameters. How, then, did the press describe and portray audiences: in what way were West-End audiences portrayed differently from those of music hall and working-class spectators; and in what ways did the press collude in the rhetorical "containment" of the non-Bourgeois or the "other." Peter Bailey has noted that the fear of "otherness" on the part of Victorian elites was particularly directed toward working-class leisure. "Leisure," writes Bailey, constituted a threat to the discipline and cohesion of the bourgeois world not only by virtue of its unprecedented

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abundance, but because of its new place in the pattern of life." Working-class leisure
provided the potential for subversion, "a dangerous frontier zone which . . . [lay] outside
the writ of established law and order."7

Janice Carlisle has explored these issues in her article on Charles Dickens' "Two
Views of a Cheap Theatre," a magazine article written after the author's excursion to the
Britannia in 1850. Carlisle argues that Dickens' description of the working-class
spectators serves "less as a disinterested account of a particular theater than as proof of
the extent to which Victorian theater in general was seen to serve political functions
conformable to middle-class goals."8 Carlisle concerns herself with the ways in which
Dickens attempts to contain and render his subject harmless, taking every rhetorical
opportunity to portray it as a "docile, well-ordered, well-fed, well-ventilated audience."9
Carlisle also points out that Dickens sees the Britannia as a positive influence on its
working-class patrons, the moralism of its melodrama "performing the function of the
church more effectively than the church itself,"10 and that the mid-century Victorian
theatre "had come to function as one cog in the charitable, paternalistic machine intended
to control the poor."11

7 Peter Bailey, Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City (Cambridge:
8 Janice Carlisle, "Spectacle as Government: Dickens and the Working-Class Audience,"
The Performance of Power: Theatrical Discourse and Politics, ed. Sue-Ellen Case and
9 Carlisle, 168.
10 Carlisle, 170.
11 Carlisle, 171.
Dickens was not the only prominent member of the artistic community to see the theatre as an instrument of social control. In March, 1876 Henry Irving made a speech before the Church of England Temperance Society in Shoreditch, later published by another of Dickens' magazines, *All The Year Round*, in April of that same year. Here Irving made the case that the theatre did indeed usurp the function of the church as a source of moral instruction. He begins by reminding the clergy of a time in which prominent members of the church patronized and promoted the theatre as a refining activity, and that the Church was now in danger of becoming an irrelevancy due to its "alienation... from the general culture, and therefore from the stage." It was an astonishing argument for Irving to make before an assembly of abstemious clergy: that the stage was not so much dependent upon the Church for its moral compass, as was the Church dependent upon the stage for its survival.

This was, of course, a wild exaggeration on Irving's part, and his speech is of little value as an objective sociological analysis. Irving does, however, encapsulate in this one speech every significant notion regarding the working-class audience and the class distinctions which were at the heart of the press's discussion of legitimacy, and its apparent need to separate working-class entertainments from The Theatre as a Bourgeois institution. Irving's strategy was to admit to certain "abominations" about the theatre of bygone days, followed by the assertion that former evils has been "absolutely swept away, and that the audience portion of any theatre is as completely free from immoral, or even indecorous associations as Exeter Hall during the performance of the Elijah." But it becomes clear that the "audience portion" to which Irving referred did not include

12 Henry Irving, "Amusements," *All The Year Round* 22 April 1876: 133.

East End audiences or music hall spectators. The virtuous, self-regulating audience was that of the Bourgeois West End. The masses were not inherently immoral, but they were not self-regulating either. Irving quoted approvingly from an unnamed speaker who had allegedly delivered a speech some months before in a provincial town:

'A thoughtful mind must often be struck with a kind of awe in surveying society, and asking what influences are really operative in raising the masses from the low level of sordid occupations, and the lower deep of debasing pleasures. Shall we look to the magic of the home? To the lowly it is too often a scene of dirt and of fretfulness, in which even honest hard work and self-sacrifice are sourly disguised in the garb of ill-temper. Shall we turn to religion? For the minority no tongue can exaggerate its preciousness or its elevating power; but for the millions of all grades it means nothing, or it means narrowness... As to poetry, it is simply not read.'

Plays, said Irving were filled with "useful moral lesson [s]," and now, "when the cultivation of the higher arts has become a necessity, the co-operation of men of influence and refinement with those who control and direct dramatic amusements, would give the theatre the high position it was meant to hold..." Irving ended his speech with a plea for the clergy to embrace the stage and with a promise that the stage would embrace them in return by "disarming and decimating the forces which make for moral evil, and in implanting and fostering the seeds and energies of moral good."  

Irving's argument was based on three key assumptions: 1.) the working and lower middle classes are overly susceptible to "moral evil" and must be controlled and

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contained, 2.) the middle and upper middle classes are the moral arbiters of society and the guardians of the commonweal. 3.) the theatre was an improving activity and an agent of social control. In the first two assumptions, Irving is squarely in line with the mainstream social thinking of his day (see discussion below)\(^\text{17}\), and in the last assumption he is thoroughly in agreement with Dickens himself who had defended, in an article published 25 years before Irving's speech, "a well-conducted theatre" as "[a]mong other good places of sound rational amusement, . . . a good place in which to learn good things."\(^\text{18}\)

The underlying fear of and the rhetorical infantilization of the working classes, along with the desire to control and contain expressed in both Irving and Dickens's arguments was part of a broad national discourse that extended far beyond the context of the theatre or music hall. What is striking about so much of this discourse is the way in which Bourgeois opinion dealt with the perceived threat posed by the working and lower-middle class. Here was a representation of the "other" that was not safely ensconced in some colony or commonwealth, but was, instead, uncomfortably domestic. Moreover, here was a double-bind: this dark and unruly force which, if left unattended, threatened to overwhelm Bourgeois political and economic structures and institutions, was also a force necessary for the maintenance of those very same structures. Gareth Stedman Jones has written about the perception of this ominous threat, this new class of laborer, 

\(^{17}\) Richard Foulkes points out that "[e]ducation and self-improvement proved to be fruitful ground for the rapprochement between Church and stage. There was self-interest on both sides. It was in the theatre's interest to assert its educational value, and the Church saw the potential of entertainments to enhance its own attractiveness." See Foulkes, *Church and Stage in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 91.

indistinguishable to many contemporaries from criminals, apparently divorced from all forms of established religion, or ties with their social superiors, inhabiting unknown cities within the capital, . . . [constituting] a disquieting alien presence in the midst of Victorian plenty: especially in the light of the growing importance of London in relation to the rest of the country after 1850. . . . London was . . . the capital of a vast new empire. Contemporaries grew increasingly fond of comparing the grandeur of London with that of ancient Rome. But that comparison was itself disquieting. For just as Rome had often been at the mercy of its mob, so London, impregnable from without, might become vulnerable to an even more potent and volatile threat from within.19

Jones' work is valuable, not as a history of the lowest order of the proletariat, but as a chronicle of middle-class opinion. This was, to borrow a phrase from Asa Briggs, the "age of improvement,"20 and the bourgeoisie was all too ready to improve an urban underclass that was widely thought to be degenerating morally, physically and spiritually with each passing generation.21 This fear of the urban residuum was accompanied by a strong faith in the efficacy of social engineering. Urban renewal (i.e. slum clearance), model housing and welfare reform, all of which retain currency within twentieth-century political discourse, have their roots in nineteenth-century notions regarding the control of


21 The theory of urban degeneration evidently reached a peak late in the century. Jones writes that a belief "in the innate superiority of the country immigrant over the London born was not in any sense new to the 1880s. Commenting on the failure of 15-year-old London boys to reach the required standards of height and girth, the Metropolitan Poor Law Inspector considered in 1871 that, 'it is well established that no town bred boys of the poorer classes, especially those reared in London, ever except in very rare instances attain the above development of form (4 ft. 101/2 in. & 29 in. chest) at the age of 15. A stunted growth is characteristic of the race.'" See Jones, 129.
the working classes. The degree to which the urban poor were objectified and
dehumanized by their guardians is indicated in this description offered by Henry Mayhew
of the so-called "criminal classes":

we have paid some little attention to such strange members of the human
family such as these, and others at war with all social institutions. We
have thought the peculiarities of their nature as worthy of study in an
ethnological point of view, as those of the people of other countries, and
we have learnt to look upon them as a distinct race of individuals, as
distinct as the Malay is from the Caucasian tribe. We have sought,
moreover, to reduce their several varieties into something like system
[sic], believing it quite as requisite that we should have an attempt at
scientific classification of the criminal classes, as of the Infusoriae or the
Cryptogamia. An enumeration of the several orders and species of
criminals will let the reader see that the class is as multifarious, and
surely, in a scientific point of view, as worthy of being studied as the
varieties of animalcules.22

Several points can be made about Mayhew's approach to his subject. His talk of a
"distinct race" and "tribes" recalls the vocabulary of colonialism, and although he makes
a distinction between the "habitual" criminal and the truly suffering member of the casual
poor, the boundary between the two is often blurred. He speaks of "natural orders and
species of criminals," yet the bulk of his work deals with prison systems geared to the
modification of behavior. Mayhew sees the environment as a behavioral determinant, but
his discussion of the "habitual" criminal indicates that he cannot break completely away
from the notion that crime is a sign of an hereditary moral weakness.

But he sees the criminal as reformable. Prisons should be places of rehabilitation,
places to introduce the criminal to middle-class values which will set him on the road to

22 Henry Mayhew and John Binny, The Criminal Prisons of London and Scenes of Prison
Life (London, 1862) 45.
a productive life. Interestingly, this is accomplished by fostering an appreciation for industry and hard work—presumably in the service of capital. His unshakable belief in the power of social conditioning is apparent when he says that the "mode of rendering labour agreeable consists in the wonderful educational power of that mysterious principle of habit by which any mental or muscular operation . . . comes, by regular and frequent repetition, to be not only pleasant to perform, but after a time positively unpleasant to abstain from."23 What Mayhew does not recognize is that, although chronic unemployment among the residuum not only contributed to crime, it was also absolutely essential to the British economy in that it drove down the cost of labor and kept inflation at bay.24

Mayhew's study may have been limited to prisons, but the assumptions underlying his approach were widespread. His concern with rehabilitation was related to a concept which had wide currency throughout the century—that of rational entertainment or rational recreation, or the conviction that leisure activities should be geared to the social improvement of the participant. The effects of this notion can be seen by those exhibits chronicled by Richard Altick in which amusement was designed, not only to entertain, but to educate.25 The popularity of scientific lectures, ethnological exhibits, and

23 Mayhew, 108.

24 This was especially true of workers on the sweated trades and seasonal employees such as dockworkers. Skilled artisans enjoyed a degree of security because they could not be easily replaced.

25 "If a choice had to be made," writes Altick in his discussion of rational amusement, "there was no question that instruction commanded a high priority over 'mere' enjoyment, of whatever sort." The goal of the rational recreationists was an "efficacious blend of application and indulgence." See Richard D. Altick, The Shows of London (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1978) 227.
technological displays reflected this trend. Often these amusements were nothing more than thinly disguised commercial ventures, the "educational" aspects of which were highly suspect. Still others were very serious. The early century charlatans and carnival barkers chronicled by Altick gave way later in the century to the notion of the professional museum, a repository ostensibly dedicated, in the words of Edward Grey, nineteenth-century curator of the British Museum's zoological department, to "the diffusion of instruction and rational amusement among the mass of the people."26

One pioneer of the museum movement, Augustus Pitt-Rivers, developed a theory of the evolution of material culture and sought to exhibit material things in such a way as to shed light on that evolutionary process. For Pitt-Rivers, the evolutionary development of cultural artifacts reflected the evolutionary development of the mind of Man—the development from the simple to the complex. By arranging artifacts in a museum, Pitt-Rivers believed he could establish a visual record of the progress of culture. Such exhibitions would instruct even the most untrained observer.

Pitt-Rivers' project may seem far removed from Irving's concerns about the theatre and its potential for moral instruction, but it had at its root a similar social agenda. Pitt-Rivers motivation for his museum of material culture was to

create other interests, which would draw men's minds away from politics, that greatest of all curses in a country district . . . . If only a more scientific

knowledge of the arts of life, and of the laws of nature affecting the
development of those industries by which the working classes gain their
living, the results would be beneficial [sic]²⁷

If Irving saw the theatre as a vehicle for moral pacification of the mob, Pitt-Rivers saw
his museum as a vehicle by which to instill in the masses a sense of the naturalness and
propriety of evolution, an ideology of political gradualism, in the hope that doing so
might curtail any proletarian tendencies toward revolution. So the museum movement
employed, much as Irving proposed for the theatre, rational amusement as a tool of social
control.

Peter Bailey and Hugh Cunningham have also written on working-class leisure—both
as an instrument of control on the part of middle-class social arbiters and as an
instrument of resistance on the part of working men and women themselves.²⁸ Both
Cunningham and Bailey chronicle the ways in which middle-class reformers tried to both
micro- and macro-manage proletarian leisure as a means of socially controlling what
they could not eradicate by any other means. Here, "rational recreation," as Bailey writes,
"became more than an exercise in repair or pacification: it became part of the ongoing
and fundamental re-socialisation of the working-classes."²⁹ Both authors ignore the
theatre, although Bailey notes how the music hall became increasingly commodified and
commercialized in the latter half of the 1800s.

²⁷ Van Keuren 284.
²⁸ See Peter Bailey, Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the
Contest for Control (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978) and Hugh Cunningham,
²⁹ Bailey, 171.
Although direct references to rational recreation, such as the one made by Irving to the Temperance Society, were unusual, the assumptions upon which the notion was based were frequently to be found in articles about amusements, music halls and theatres patronized by the working class. The first assumption is that which posited the inherent danger, the fundamental subversiveness presented by the lower class audience, an assumption which mirrored the broader based middle-class concerns about the urban residuum of which the theatrical audience was but a microcosm.

There was a connection, as Frederick Brown has pointed out, between the French Revolution and the theatre, between the birth of melodrama and the political developments which engulfed France in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.\(^\text{30}\) For Brown, the melodrama and street theatre of the period was a re-enactment of the blood and confusion of the political moment, a chance for the mob to make manifest its politics in the streets. For the English, the revolution with its Jacobin excesses, must have been a cautionary lesson, a reminder of their own relative political stability which held resonance well into the nineteenth century. "The history of the [French] theatre is . . . also that of the Revolution," wrote The New Monthly Magazine in 1865, "a history which was written everywhere; there, as in the assembly or in the street. Thus, whilst an armed populace captured the Bastille, the Théâtre Français opened its doors for the benefit of the combatants."\(^\text{31}\) The Magazine article traces the history of the French stage throughout the revolutionary period, a period which ends, significantly, with Napoleon's ascent to the monarchy and the destruction of the minor theatres. The theatres, having fallen into the hands of the mob under the regime of Robespierre became the propaganda


tool of the sans-culottes. At the Théâtre de la République mob sentiments had reigned supreme, leading the Magazine to wonder at the intolerance "of these self-constituted advocates of liberty—the Jacobins." In one play, Le Jugement dernier des rois, by Sylvain Maréchal, a Frenchman exiled to an island by the king is visited by an international group of sans culottes from every European country, each delegation bringing its own king in chains. When the exile asks why the other kings were not executed as was the French sovereign, the answer is chilling:

Old Man. But tell me, I pray you, wherefore did you give yourself the trouble of bringing all these kings here? It would have been better to have hanged each under the portico of his palace.

French Sans-culotte. No, no. Their punishment would have been far too mild. It would not have fulfilled the objects proposed. It appeared more becoming to offer to Europe the spectacle of its tyrants detained in a menagerie and devouring one another, being no longer able to glut their passions upon the brave sans-culottes, whom they dared to call their subjects.

For New Monthly Magazine, such "theatrical orgies" were rational recreation of the wrong sort, an inculcation and reinforcement of the worst political and anarchical tendencies of the masses. Interestingly, the author does not advocate censorship, in fact he criticizes Napoleon's attempts to control the content of plays as "invariably . . . [involving] itself at times in the ridiculous." But the Magazine is also quick to mention

32 "Politics on the Stage," 115.
34 "Politics on the Stage," 117.
35 "Politics on the Stage," 122.
that the emperor (and the monarchy) did restore order with the destruction of the minor theatres, the entertainment havens of the poor and the dispossessed, and the subsequent return to state-sponsored elitism. The message is clear: left to its own devices the mob will not only do violence to the state, but to aesthetics as well. The Jacobin audience corrupts the stage in a microcosm of its destruction of the commonweal.

England, of course, had no such history of violent Jacobin rebellion, but as Stedman-Jones, Cunningham and Bailey have all demonstrated, this did not lessen the anxiety of the middle class. In the press, the anxiety was often manifested in the many accounts to be found of theatrical riots as examples of theatrical mob rule.

One such account was The New Monthly Magazine's article in which a theatrical disturbance was equated with "a Chartist outbreak." Written in 1848, a year of revolutionary disturbance throughout Europe, the author begins by noting (with some satisfaction) that a planned Chartist demonstration—the word "demonstration" surrounded by quotation marks to indicate the author's suspicions regarding the Chartists' peaceful intentions—had been rendered "a complete abortion" by the efforts of the police and military.

Fate, however, had decreed that the 12th of June should not pass over without a 'row' of some kind, and though the day was free from political excitement, it was marked by the greatest theatrical uproar known in London since the days of the 'O.P.'

The "row" to which the New Monthly Magazine referred was occasioned by the appearance of a French company at Drury Lane Theatre, where a xenophobic faction

36 "The Uproar at Drury Lane Theatre," The New Monthly Magazine July 1848: 393.
37 "The Uproar at Drury Lane Theatre," 393.
rioted in protest against the desecration of the national theatre by foreigners and free trade run amuck. According to the Magazine, the rioters "represented the English theatrical interest," although none were "leading members of the theatrical profession." It was difficult, the author wrote, to placate men who "believed that their 'bread and cheese' depended on the contest." The rioters, concentrated in the pit, insulted the upper-class occupants of the dress boxes, presumably as punishment for their patronage and approval of the French company. All semblance of order disintegrated:

Here a couple of individuals amused themselves by putting up their umbrellas in the pit, there a person in the boxes was pulling off his coat to thrash some offending Frenchman. Here an English orator was vainly endeavoring to make himself heard; there a little Gallican heroine in a pink bonnet was committing violent assaults on any member of the opposition who chanced to be within her reach. Persons in the boxes supposed to entertain opinions favorable to the house, were insultingly addressed by name from the pit, and one noble lady, who escaped from the tumult, in a carriage, was pursued with execration by a mob collected outside.

The behavior of the rioters, as described by the Magazine, was a classic example of John Bull's xenophobia and misplaced patriotism. Like the Jack Tar figure of melodrama, the rioters are motivated by a crude nationalism which, carefully controlled and limited, could at times be exploited by the state under certain political circumstances. But like the Chartists, they at the same time constituted a subversive presence and had great destructive potential. The chaos represented by theatrical riots was not overtly

38 "The Uproar at Drury Lane Theatre," 395.

39 "The Uproar at Drury Lane Theatre," 394.

40 See J.S. Bratton, et al, Acts of Supremacy: The British Empire and the Stage (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1991). Bratton and her co-authors argue that the Jack Tar figure is the pre-eminent defender of the empire, wielding an almost mystical power in 178
political, but stories recounting the behavior of ill-bred audiences served to remind Victorian middle-class readers of their own gentility and to draw distinctions not only between themselves and the lower classes, but between themselves and even the better-bred spectators of the past. The well-bred Victorian Bourgeois of the late nineteenth century could with some moral satisfaction compare himself favorably to the poorly mannered swells of the seventeenth century who set fire to the Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre as vendetta toward the Duchess of Portsmouth, or the marquis, who, in 1740, led the crowd in an attempt to burn down Drury Lane during a performance. Whether the comparisons were between those of another class or another era, the mid- and late-nineteenth-century eclectic press was in the business of drawing distinctions that flattered their middle-class readers.

The most significant and remarked upon theatrical disturbance was that of the Old Price Riots, which to H. Barton Baker, writing in Belgravia in 1878, recalled "a state of manners . . . as far removed from us as though it was of centuries back." John Bull's vengeance, wrote Baker, could not be contained within the walls of Covent Garden, and spilled into the streets even to Kemble's house, where mobs gathered to threaten and hurl insults. The hisses and catcalls inspired the poem, excerpted below, which was

its defense, but "he cannot bring this great power back home into the domestic situation without causing disruption and possibly doing damage to the fabric of society . . . "(41).


42 "Goose," All The Year Round 28 Sept. 1872: 469.

43 Baker, 482.

44 Baker, 481.
published in the *Morning Chronicle* on September 22, 1809. The "cat" refers to Madame Catalani, whose high salary was alleged to have been the catalyst for the new prices.

'This is the house that Jack built.
'These are the boxes let to the great that visit the house that Jack built.
'These are the pigeon-holes over the boxes let to the great that visit the house that Jack built.
'This is the cat engaged to squall to the poor in the pigeon-holes over the boxes let to the great that visit the house that Jack built.\(^{45}\)

Baker's anecdotes also elicited the sort of imagery that played to middle-class fears of an usurping underclass. Consider his description of the eighteenth-century footmen who literally usurped their master's places by occupying the seats of their betters until they arrived at the theatre. Perched in the boxes, the footmen would show their insolence by hurling pieces of orange peel into the pit and creating such general havoc that the management of Drury Lane eventually refused them admission. The next night, wrote Baker,

> they assembled in large numbers, forced their way in, and, notwithstanding the presence of the Prince of Wales, proceeded to the most violent extremes. The rest of the audience, who hated them heartily for their insolent airs, took part with the authorities, a battle royal ensued, in which the Jeameses got the worst of it . . . \(^{46}\)

The press was still fascinated with bad audience behavior as late as 1900, when *Argosy*, praising the theatres of its own day in which playgoers could "attend a different theatre every night of the week, without hearing a single dissentient voice," recalled a time in which the management of Drury Lane was forced to enlist "the services of thirty

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\(^{45}\) Baker, 480.

\(^{46}\) Baker, 473.
prize-fighters in order to assist the military in maintaining order.\textsuperscript{47} Argosy gave special mention to the Astor Place Riots, which, in sharp contrast to the O.P. disturbances were extremely violent. The American rioters were not simply rowdy, but malevolently destructive, and the author, Noel Williams, emphasizes the ineffectuality of the authorities, "utterly powerless" as they were to contain the fury of the mob.\textsuperscript{48}

Of course, American audiences represented a force unconstrained by the civilizing influence of the overt British class system. American audiences were not only ill-mannered, but it was their ill manners and poor taste which actually led to a degraded drama. They represented the threat to the British stage were it not under the restraining influence of the class-conscious bourgeoisie. "Neither art, nor the drama, nor music, nor literature, nor criticism," wrote All The Year Round in 1861, "can be expected to stand very high in a new country where the population is of a mixed race, and where the chief objects of nearly all men are either commerce or agriculture."\textsuperscript{49} That the business of Britain's newly affluent middle class was also largely commerce and agriculture was not mentioned by the author, but the point was clear: Americans go and hear Italian music because it is the fashion; they buy bad statues because they have no sound principles of taste to guide them; and they give their assent to vulgar high-flown musical criticism, too affected to be intelligible, and too prejudiced to be just, because they have no time to acquire for themselves any real knowledge of the subject.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{47} Noel Williams, "Some Famous Theatrical Riots," Argosy Oct. 1900: 224.

\textsuperscript{48} Williams, 228.

\textsuperscript{49} "American Theatrical Experiences," All The Year Round 6 July 1861: 348.

\textsuperscript{50} "American Theatrical Experience," 348.
The author, who gives only brief mention to such "respectable" American playhouses as Wallack's and Laura Keen's Theatre, expounds at length mostly on the kitsch houses of the New York theatre. P.T. Barnum's lecture hall and theatre (which justified itself in the vocabulary of rational recreation and as an "improving" entertainment) was a house of "pre-eminent clap-trap," and "Broadway, the Whitechapel of New York," was described as a district "in which the 'hard-fisted' rowdies sup their full of horrors." The audiences at the Bowery, undisciplined and uncomfortably republican in sentiment, "heave and bellow at every allusion to liberty . . . ."  

The audience is composed of a motley collection of human flotsam, "rows of pale, dirty faces—. . . [and] the hideous juvenile old men among the 'hard-fisted' of the Bowery . . . ." At first the author is impressed by the orderliness of the crowd and how it obeys unquestioningly the majordomo as he makes room in the auditorium for newcomers. The "majordomo," however, turns out to be a plainclothes policeman there "to preserve [the] order and decency" which would surely break down without him. And so the spectators, while outwardly compliant, nonetheless represented a threat which can only be contained by constant vigilance and supervision. The logical extension of uncouth audiences was a lack of discrimination in aesthetics. The fare in American theatres was, therefore, almost necessarily of inferior quality. This went without saying for a venue such as the Bowery, but it was also true of more respectable theatres such as Niblo's. It was at that theatre that the author saw a production of Othello in which the actor playing

the title role fell into "exaggerated . . . caricature," resulting in a production in which "[r]ampant conceit, and the vulgarisms of a bovine nature were always breaking out."\textsuperscript{54}

There was a certain counterbalance to this view of the audience as a threatening force-the alarmist view—which saw the working-class audience as effectively tamed through the act of imitating their middle-class betters. Dickens's magazine, \textit{All The Year Round} was especially interested in reporting the good behavior of transpontine audiences. There is a note of condescension and surprise in the magazine's description of the Surrey patrons, the "enthusiastic, nay, . . . noisy audience which crowded Mr. Holland's theatre from floor to roof. . . ." The author notes that the Surrey's social conventions mirror those of the tonier West End, with the "Elite of Kennsington" filling the stalls and the boxes occupied by "the magnates of local trade." It is a boisterous, crowd but "well-behaved, most cordial, and sincere . . . ."\textsuperscript{55}

It is not surprising that Dickens's magazine should engage in this sort of ethnological reporting; it was interested in demonstrating the salient effect of the theatre on the poor and potentially dangerous. The author begins his argument with a description of the dangerous environment surrounding the theatre and, by extension, its audience. "Few of those who live West," he writes,

\begin{quote}
know anything of that world which we have traversed in our drive due East—have any idea of the better and more attractive aspects of the most unfashionable quarter of London! True, we have threaded some stifling thoroughfares, where flaming gas-jets have lit up bulks on which malodorous fish are exposed for sale, and whose surface is covered with
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{54} "American Theatrical Experience," 351.

\textsuperscript{55} "Some Theatrical Audiences," \textit{All The Year Round} 19 May 1877: 276.
decaying vegetables and unsightly morsels; have seen many signs of misery and vice; much filth; much squalor; much dirt, and rags, and drunkenness.\(^{56}\)

The audience of workmen and their families are "grimy, and the hair unkempt," and they drink prodigious amounts of porter and consume huge quantities of nuts and sandwiches, hardly, the author notes, a "polite show of light refreshments." These were workmen, but respectable workmen who knew what was expected of them, crude imitators of middle-class decorum. As a proponent of rational recreation, All The Year Round had its theory as to what was the chief cause of this docility—the improving qualities and calming effects of the theatre in its cleanest, most wholesome form. The author ends his article with a reminder that the theatre is "a mighty instrument for the harmless amusement of five thousand of the poor of London, in the heart of such a district as Hoxton . . . a boon for which the moralist and philanthropist may well be grateful."\(^{57}\)

A half decade later, All The Year Round would continue to extol the theatre as a "delightful escape from indoor squalor (if they have an indoors) or from the listlessness and ribaldry of the street . . . ."\(^{58}\) The audience at the Vic is boisterous, but controlled, and although it is not stated outright in the text, the author's language implies that such good behavior does not come naturally, but must be cultivated by activities which serve to suppress more natural, less savory, impulses. The audience's "explosive" reaction to the performance, the various allusions, antics, poetic passages and jokes,

\(^{56}\) "Some Theatrical Audiences," 277.

\(^{57}\) "Some Theatrical Audiences," 277-78.

\(^{58}\) "Up in the Gallery," All The Year Round 29 July 1882: 7.
is not likely to be dealt out to the grace of beautiful vocalisation, to the charm of accuracy, of picturesqueness, of the light froth of guiltless fun. Nor is this manner of recognition expected. But that there is acceptance of good things at all, that there is enjoyment of them, that good things can keep an uninstructed audience, and move an uninstructed audience, is new to the caterers of amusement certainly, and is of such immense value it ought to meet with full noting.  

The audience, in other words, is soothed by the performance, much as is the savage beast by music; it does not fully understand what it sees, nor does it appreciate aesthetics in any real sense, but it does instinctually grasp on a visceral level that what it sees and hears is good, the subsequent calming effect being a boon to society. The author ends by endorsing the trickle-down effect of the better class of theatres and pays tribute to "the purity of the higher stage (and of the higher literature, and the higher music: for they are all banded together)," and exhorts all those "who wish this purity to descend down and down till it reaches those who have not cultivation enough to be able to look out for purity themselves," to go and see the entertainment and witness its beneficial effects.

But not everyone emphasized the effect of the drama upon the audience. Others were more concerned about the quality of the drama and the audience's effect upon the aesthetic purity of dramatic literature and performance. After the Select Committee report on theatres and music halls was issued in 1866, Frasier's penned an article in which it supported strict controls on dramatic performances in music halls. This issue was, of course, a serious bone of contention between theatre lessees and music hall proprietors, all of whom were struggling for the patronage of what they perceived as a


60 "Up in the Gallery," 10.
finite audience with, apparently, little prospect for growth (See Chapter Two). After reviewing the principal arguments for and against more liberal policies toward music hall, Frasier's justified its conclusion, not so much out of sympathy for theatre lessees and their economic problems, but as a protective measure against the potential injury done to the drama if it be degraded by audiences unfit to appreciate it. It was the "social and moral bearings of public places of amusement" which was Frasier's central concern. The social make-up of many of the theatres, let alone the music halls, was made up, claimed the author, in large part by "casuals from the country . . . [who] bring nothing with them but money paid for their places and their own desire to be amused." The problem with such a large influx of tourist bumpkins into the city's theatres, was that "the public, knowing no better, is satisfied with an inferior article, presented . . . in an inferior way." Here, at a time when British audiences are becoming more educated and respectable, an influential contemporary magazine professes anxiety over the lack of spectator sophistication and education in comparison with audiences of the past.

If the theatrical audiences were a source of concern, then how much more anxious was Frasier's over the prospect of music hall patrons and their potential effect upon the drama? For one thing, the music halls represented a significantly greater danger to the art as they were not under the paternal influence of the Lord Chamberlain, receiving their licenses from ordinary magistrates. The author admitted that music halls, given the chance, "would not meddle much in the more important regions of the drama." They would stick to short pieces of puffery and light entertainment. Still, this would be injurious to the higher drama as it would degrade the profession as a whole and the

61 "Theatrical Licenses," 93.

higher drama would be tarred through guilt by association. "The result of fully extending the privileges of the theatres to the music halls," Frasier's claimed,

would not be to expose good actors to degradation in performing to an inattentive audience, which would never answer the purpose of their proprietors, but to lower audience and performers alike to a style of entertainment at no time partaking of a high or improving character.63

Here Frasier's seemed to be protecting the music hall audience from the effects of the entertainment which was most popular with that audience; but in its conclusion the magazine suggests its real concern is with the injury done to the drama by spectators unable to comprehend or appreciate it:

[W]e do not wish to have the so-called music-halls allowed to give the regular drama, and to see realised the situation, so feelingly deprecated by one of the dramatic witnesses [from the Select Committee of 1866], who, supposing himself to be performing in a music-hall, puts the case—'While I am speaking Hamlet's soliloquy, perhaps a man asks for potatoes and a kidney.' The drama, as a high form of art, and as a means of education, is worth preserving, and we venture to think that it should be, and that it may be preserved.64

There was a certain fascination on the part of some magazine writers of the mid- and late-century with slumming, an almost ethnological interest in the characteristics of the spectators in the "low resorts" as Once A Week referred to the Vic and to the Growler Saloon music hall in 1866.65 "You are going to see the legitimate drama at Drury Lane?," the author, Arthur Ogilvy asks in the beginning of his piece. "We wish we could

63 "Theatrical Licenses," 100.

64 "Theatrical Licenses," 102.

accompany you, but our taste is for a low and grovelling form of entertainment . . . ."66

Ogilvy continues before leading his readership on a tour of the Growler and a Whitechapel gaffe called the "Roscius," a dilapidated structure known for catering to a clientele "chiefly of the Jewish persuasion."67

Chambers's Edinburgh Journal, a champion of working-class respectability, was promoting the virtues of tavern theatres as early as 1839. Chambers's, always prepared to defend those of the "humbler" classes, was an enthusiastic proponent of wholesome recreation for workmen, and it found that many of the tavern theatres were "not necessarily disreputable places."68 In describing one tavern theatre, the Eagle, Chambers's mentioned a "tastefully laid out" establishment with "beautiful busts and statues . . . all around," adding that "[n]othing could be more elegant than the style in which the whole is fitted up and decorated."69 But it is clear that, for Chambers's, the Eagle's good reputation flows not so much from natural tastes of its working- and lower middle-class clientele, but from that clientele's imitation of their middle- and upper middle-class betters. The establishment, in fact, benefits greatly from a mixed audience, including "many staid-looking, middle-aged personages to be seen there, whose amplitude of girth and comfortable aspect at once distinguish them as having for no short time enjoyed all the advantages of being their own masters." And it would have been misleading, stated Chambers's, to suggest "that no respectable women of the middle and

66 Ogilvy, 638.

67 Ogilvy, 642.


humbler classes are ever visitants to the establishment." All of this is compared favorably to the type of tavern theatre of which Chambers's clearly did not approve: those "immeasurably inferior," places which had not the middle-class affect, places which resembled "a common taproom." 70

There is little commentary in the mid- and late-nineteenth-century magazine press on music hall, and much of what was written compares the artists and audiences of music hall unfavorably with the artists and audiences of the legitimate theatre. Even at the turn of the twentieth century, after a period in which the music hall supposedly was commercialized and made more palatable to the fashionable classes, there was still considerable criticism in the newspaper press against the halls and their allegedly inferior aesthetic values which, as music hall singing star Albert Chevalier wrote, were "not as a rule written in a complimentary strain." The critics, said Chevalier, tongue planted firmly in cheek, were "indignant that people dare to avow their preference for a Variety Entertainment over a three hours' spell of Shakespeare." 71

Three generalizations can be made in characterizing the attitude of the press toward the halls from mid-century on. The first generalization is that the press defended the music halls against implicit charges of moral turpitude and obscenity. Just as the theatre suffered from very little anti-theatrical prejudice on the part of the press throughout the period, it can also be said that music halls were very seldom excoriated by the press for being conducive to improper behavior or for being an evil in and of themselves. As Cornhill Magazine commented in 1867, the alleged disorder and impropriety of the

70 "London Tavern-Theatres," 151.

music halls "is so inconsiderable as hardly to enter into the question." What criticism the press did levy against the halls—and this is the second generalization—was almost exclusively aesthetic (with notable exceptions). From the 1860s until the end of the century, articles on music halls were suffused with concern over public taste in general, and in the supposed power of music hall fare to influence popular taste against the serious, legitimate drama. The theatre, wrote Frasier's in 1859, should be appreciated instead of vilified by its detractors who saw in it a source of moral degeneracy, because the theatre emptied "the casinos and the gin palaces," and promoted "innocent and intellectual entertainment." But it was the clientele of the "gin palaces" that was the subject of the third and most interesting generalization. Descriptions of music hall audiences, like those of the working-class theatres, largely dwelt upon their working-class and lower middle-class characteristics (despite the fact that many of the fashionable classes had begun to patronize the trendier halls by late century), but rarely, if ever, intimated anything in the least threatening about them. Unlike the riotous theatre audiences depicted in the articles above, music hall patrons were depicted as docile and complacent, content to sip their beer and enjoy a song or dance, however badly performed or composed. But the defense of the music hall audience was a backhanded one, a defense not of the music hall as a separate and legitimate entertainment, but as an almost necessary evil, an opiate for a class of spectator who could not possibly know enough or possess the sophistication needed to enjoy the higher and purer art of the theatre.


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Matthew Browne, commenting in *Argosy* on the rivalry between theatres and music halls in 1866, was for example unconcerned with the threat of improprieties posed by the halls:

> Can anything be more absurd than what the terrified pruriency of very well-meaning people figures to itself about what 'goes on' (that is a favourite phrase, *goes on*—it is so deliciously mysterious!) 'behind the scenes,' or the 'depravity' of the ballet-girls? . . . The prurient good people think with horror of the 'orgies' or 'saturnalia' that 'go on' behind the unconscious curtain. Drop them down suddenly in the midst of stage 'business,' and they would be astonished to find that actresses are very much like their own sisters . . .

For Browne, the tradesmen and mechanics in the audience were constrained from drinking too much by the presence of their wives by whom most were accompanied. As for any accusations of bad behavior on the part of music hall audiences it had very much improved, in Browne's opinion, and the habit of East-End theatre patrons as well as music hall habitués of talking incessantly throughout the performance was no worse than the chattering which went on in the boxes at the better class of theatres. In fact, as Browne later admits, the good behavior of most music hall audiences was proof that such entertainment served a worthy social purpose, "and one could hardly help being glad at heart to see them sitting there so quietly, out of mischief for the time, and getting the benefit of even so low a form of art." This was the bargain basement of rational

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75 Browne, 121.

76 Browne, 123.

77 Browne, 124.
entertainment, a lowly form of amusement with little cultural capital, but which
nevertheless lulled the humbler classes into a desirable state of docility.

But music hall was not a true art form in Browne's estimation. The function of art, he
wrote was "to chasten, while delighting," through the presentation of beauty and order.
But the "moment Art ceases to be beautiful, it becomes powerless to give delight; it can
then only confer pleasure, which can be had better and cheaper without Art." This was
the role of the music hall: to provide pleasure to patrons incapable of appreciating art; to
entertain "the half-cultivated population of our great cities," for whom the drama had no
appeal.

Cornhill Magazine saw free competition between theatres and music halls as an
opportunity to improve the "amusements of the lower orders." As in all of the
commentary on music hall, Cornhill's position on the amusements of the underprivileged
was invested with an almost missionary zeal over "improvement" of their taste and,
implicitly, in their social and political attitudes. Free market policies would allow for

a keener competition for good actors and good plays. They [the music hall
proprietors] know that the class for which they cater would not come to
them without the social attraction of drinking and smoking; as has been

78 Browne, 118.

79 Browne, 120. In fairness, Browne makes this point in a broader argument against the
censorship of the Lord Chamberlain and the English tradition of government regulation
of entertainment. Bad taste, he implies, is indeed a social scourge, but a scourge that
cannot be regulated out of existence. "You do not like the idea of Hamlet's soliloquy
delivered in the midst of tobacco-smoke? No more do I. But who are you, pray?
Somebody else does like it . . . (128).

shown before, they do not desire to interfere with the theatres, but have, as regards a great many of them, an equally laudable desire to improve and lead the public taste into a higher groove.\footnote{81}{"Music-Halls Versus the Drama," 125.}

Again the belief in rational recreation, of a vague notion of "improvement" is apparent, if not very well explained, except that the theatre proper, Shakespeare and the legitimate drama is again the standard for which the improving qualities of potential music-hall fare were measured. The idea that the "lower orders" were marked by a vulgar reliance on tobacco and alcohol as necessary components of amusement is more or less typical of the mid-century commentary on music hall, an irony given that the fashionable crowds of the West End also had their allocated areas for smoking and drinking in theatres, even if those areas were not in the house itself.

Things had evidently not improved much for \textit{Cornhill} even twenty tears later when the magazine proclaimed that the humor of the music hall was "the humour of the gutter, of the kind familiar to anyone whose ears are open as he walks the streets; the repartee is that of the 'bus-driver in collision with a rival, and observations generally on life and manners those of the lowest."\footnote{82}{"The Music-Hall," \textit{Cornhill Magazine} July 1889: 79.} Music halls celebrated vice in the nature of their satire; the parody was second-rate, and the sophistication of the audience fairly low, as \textit{Cornhill} noted that one could "always make pretty sure of a music-hall audience, either by attacking the vices of the aristocracy or abusing Russia."\footnote{83}{"The Music-Hall," 74.} As disdainful of the music hall patrons as \textit{Cornhill} was, it mixed its scorn with an equally condescending tribute to the moral values of the working class, which, simple as it was, could still find in itself to
ridicule the vices being portrayed on the stage. The "honest tradesmen . . . men and women whose lives are full of order, duty, labor, self-denial, are not laughing with the artistes, but at them." And so the music hall becomes an instrument of improvement—by reinforcing a healthy disdain for immoral and deviant behavior by holding that behavior up to ridicule. Again, implicit in this view of music hall amusement is the notion that such audiences need be controlled and contained by such reinforcement lest they revert to acting on their more natural and less desirable impulses.

Several years after the Comhill piece was published, Frederick Wedmore would write an article for *The Nineteenth Century* in which he paid tribute to a few exceptional music hall stars such as Chevalier and Yvette Guilbert. Wedmore even defended the use of nude women in the *tableau vivant*, which he maintained represented not simply nude women, but an *objet d'art*. But Wedmore was not defending the music hall in general; the halls were, to him, places where a few worthy individual performers supplied a thin veneer for a great mass of mediocre talent. "And indeed," he wrote, "a large tolerance is very much required from any one who, having seen great Art, the art of Aimée Desclée and Sarah Bernhardt, of Got and Mrs. Kendal and Henry Irving, betakes himself to a little study of the Music-Hall." Here Wedmore holds the legitimate theatre up as the standard for "Art," a standard to which the music hall falls far short. Wedmore makes two major points in addition to asserting the general inferiority of the halls. The first is that the music hall audience is one of the chief culprits for the shallowness of the music hall talent. Having "no great opinion of the refinement of music-hall audiences," Wedmore maintained that the lack of elevation and sophistication in music hall entertainment

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reflected an "easy acquiescence in the grosser view of Life which is taken, undoubtedly, by no small part of its habitual patrons." This was the principal cause of the male performers being "incomparably tiresome, incomparably dull—not seldom even revolting." As for the female performers, very few would appear to have ever thought it necessary, in their song, to add Art to Nature—to have studied voice production. And either the quality of the voice is often pitiably unmusical, or it is strained to hold its own against the too loud accompaniment of the band, or it is practically sacrificed to jerky, loud effects and gestures supposed to be telling.

And if any of them showed any modicum of talent, they were whisked away from the variety stage like "the one or two young people whose romping songs, whose graceful dances, have brought them from the Music-Hall to the Dramatic Stage." Wedmore had defined the problem: unsophisticated audiences whose vulgar tastes encouraged the mediocre into ill-advised careers in the variety stage. Wedmore's solution was that of the rational recreationist. He noted with some approval the trend among certain halls in the exhibition of scientific marvels—specifically the x-ray and the "Kinetophone." Wedmore harbored no illusions that the music hall would supplant the "popularised science of the Polytechnic," but he was certain that science and technology would draw "a better class of people" to the performances which, in turn, would be a great "influence in improving the performance as a whole." It was a circular argument:

86 Wedmore, 135.
87 Wedmore, 132.
88 Wedmore, 133.
89 Wedmore, 136.
first to improve the performance in order to draw from the more desirable classes which
would, again, improve the performance and perhaps earn the music-hall a place in the
world of "Art."

Even Dickens' magazine, with its populist views, could not fully endorse the music
hall and made clear its disdain, in a series of articles published throughout the latter half
of the century, for the low artistic standards of the halls. In 1873 it complained of the
"foolish and inane" songs and "the dangerous gymnastic feats and second-rate dancing,
which now-a-days occupy such prominent places in the music-hall programme,"
declaring such entertainment "neither amusing nor edifying." In 1880, it offered a
defense against charges of raucous behavior and excessive drinking. The author
expressed dissatisfaction with the treatment afforded music halls in the press, remarking
that so many articles had been written with "such a bias, such a determination to write
them [the halls] down, such a tendency to consider them as almost beneath notice . . . "
From this opening paragraph a favorable depiction of music hall might be expected to
flow. And the author does make favorable comments about the "decent mechanics" who
comprise the bulk of the audience. But All The Year Round reserved a much more
cutting criticism of those mechanics in the discussion of the entertainment itself, "a . . .
mass of rubbish" as the magazine described. The artists could make good money,
the author asserted, with little effort, as "no great training, no special learning, not even
in music, is required." The profession's principal requirement, wrote the author, was "a


little modest self-assurance and animal spirits . . . ."93 The real problem with music halls, the author maintained, was the taste of the audience: "the worst harm fostered by them is not indelicacy, is not drunkenness, but it is the low standard of musical and literary excellence with which they teach their patrons to be satisfied, and the consequent depravation of taste which prevents them from wishing for anything better." It was the law which forced the music hall proprietor away from "elevating entertainment" and toward "the slangy songs, with their silly choruses."94 Again, it was the audience which was satisfied with rubbish and which did not know enough to demand better fare, and it was the legitimate theatre which was viewed as the true art which could be the salvation of the public taste.

It was All The Year Round, too, which most succinctly encapsulated almost all of the arguments against music hall and for its subordinate position to theatre in the hierarchy of the arts, in a series of articles published in 1869, three years after the Select Committee had reconsidered state policy toward the theatres and the variety stage. The author was a self-appointed "commissioner" who had taken it upon himself to investigate allegation of indecency in the legitimate houses and in the music hall. In its six reports to the Lord Chamberlain All The Year Round examined a popular music hall, a burlesque and an East End theatre. In no one article or series examined for this study is the artificial Victorian hierarchy of the performing arts more clearly illustrated, the bias against music hall more amply demonstrated or the paternalism of the Victorian middle class more manifestly apparent. In this series All The Year Round was determined to settle the question of music-hall propriety and to show that it was not the theatres which were to


blame for the decline in public taste and morals. This was not "merely a revival of an old difficulty between managers of rival classes of entertainment," but a serious matter pertaining to the corruption of the public taste.

The author is a rational recreationist, a believer in the power of the performance to teach, instruct and control as well as the power of the public to corrupt the content of the entertainment. It was, for *All The Year Round*, imperative to preserve that delicate symbiotic relationship. Managers under attack for permitting alleged indecencies upon the stage had claimed that

the fault is not with them, but with the public; that the public has ceased to be decorous itself, and calls aloud for a want of decorum in its entertainers; that managers give, in a word, the kind of entertainment, which has at last brought upon them the mild thunders of your Lordship's office, because that kind was imperatively demanded by their exacting supporters. This is a serious charge to bring against a public; but it is a still more serious matter when the accused assumes its truth and glibly runs off, as one of the slipshod topics of the day, with commonplaces about the indecencies of the stage. People who talk thus forget the important fact that the drama with a large class of spectators takes the place of books, and is a popular instructor for good or for evil, of vast importance,—an engine of enormous power in forming the public tastes, which it is of the highest importance to keep in good working order—an institution which loses all its influences for good, if discredit be allowed to be cast upon it. The state of the theatre fairly reflects... the state of the society of the day; at any rate, the tone of the stage is in a great degree derived from the tone of the audiences—each reacts upon the other; and, if mischief be done, it is difficult to apportion the blame among the parties concerned.96

95 "To The Lord Chamberlain: The Reports of a Volunteer Commissioner," *All The Year Round* 6 March 1869: 324.

96 "To The Lord Chamberlain," 6 March 1869: 325.

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It is clear from the author's language that All The Year Round was not talking about the audiences of the West End when it referred to "a large class of spectators" who do not read and who require popular instruction. Yet again there is a concern for that part of the public that could not be counted upon to keep its moral compass or to even have a moral compass to begin with. The author would not be going to the Princess's Theatre or the Lyceum, but to the Royal Pandemonium Palace instead.97 It was the visit to the Royal Pandemonium, the "great vicious beehive, all seething within and without," 98 which laid the basis for the commissioner's argument against the music halls. The author wrote facetiously of "Mr. Complacent Briton," who is sure that "brazen Paris morals" have no place in Great Britain and who believes in music hall as a place where people of all classes "are mixed up in the pursuit of rational pleasure," and where bouncers and security men will act promptly whenever any problem arises with any member of "the class on whom liquor has a decided effect."99 To the author, the crowds at the Palace were in dire need of an improving amusement, but they were unlikely to get it. They were "stupid homely souls who . . . [came] only to look at the magnificent entertainments provided on the stage, and for whom . . . the proprietor . . . [had] a befitting contempt."

This place, said the commissioner, was not a place of "harmless pleasure," but "a school of some sort, open every night of the year, and which . . . [teaches] all the young gentlemen and ladies who resort there lessons of some description."100 There were

97 A fictitious establishment meant to represent what was considered to be the typical upscale hall of the day. It was located in "Foreigneering Square."

98 "To The Lord Chamberlain," 6 March 1869: 326.


100 "To The Lord Chamberlain," 6 March 1869: 327.
parts of the Palace that were admissible to only certain patrons, such as the canteen, that "select abode . . . under the stage," where the "lovely burdens," the female dancers and chorus girls could be found eager to socialize with and, it is implied, offer certain other services to those lucky enough to gain admittance. The author did not mention the word "prostitution," but his characterization of the Palace as a place of resort for "Moll Flanders and her companions," and as a place conducive to "undesirable French habits and morals" leaves little doubt as to what was implied.

For the commissioner, the Royal Pandemonium was not the only offending establishment. Moll Flanders was to be found at other places as well, but this did not constitute the entirety of the offense. The class of entertainment was far below what could be considered as art and the audiences which demanded such fare were "distinguished by an insolence of manner and tone, faithfully copied from the manners of their favourite on the stage." This argument, familiar to the twentieth-century ear with regard to film and television, again reflects this fear of a symbiotic cycle of social deviance, from the vulgar audience which demands vulgar entertainment which in turn makes the audience more vulgar and more dangerous. This corrupting fare included the likes of Nudita, a scantily clad female solo dancer at the Pandemonium, to the general run of the comic songs in almost any such establishment, which were,

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101 "To The Lord Chamberlain," 6 March 1869: 328.
103 "To The Lord Chamberlain: The Reports of a Volunteer Commissioner," All The Year Round 13 March 1869: 349.
104 "To The Lord Chamberlain," 6 March 1869: 328.
as a rule, beneath contempt. The loves of barmaids, the exploits of Rollicking Rams and other unpleasant persons whose sole themes are the delights of drink, and the pleasures of reeling home with the milk, are the subjects chiefly treated of. Snobbery and vulgarity are rampant and blatant in these effusions. The devices resorted to by the singers to raise a laugh, are feeble and melancholy in the extreme. Preposterous coats of violent colours and startlingly braided; great hats, frequently of the brightest blue or green, long yellow whiskers of the Dundreary type; these are some of the dreary substitutes for humour that are offered to the public on the Music Hall stage.  

The commissioner's puritanical phobia of bright and "violent" colors is something which, even to Victorian moralists must have seemed more in line with William Prynne's Histriomastix, than Dickens' All The Year Round. But the author shows very little consistency when, on a trip to a burlesque at a working-class theater in Shoreditch, in which the management offered a "leg piece," or a musical number in which the legs of the chorus women were the chief attraction. This, said the commissioner was as burlesque had always been, and even though it would have been preferable to have in the burlesque "a little more humour and good acting," nothing that was presented warranted "any special hysterical outbreak in behalf of the public morals."  

What could be made of this? Here was a light entertainment, very much like that which could be found in music hall, with an attraction just as physical as Nudita or any of the other fleshly delights of the variety stage, and which, by the author's own admission,  

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105 "To The Lord Chamberlain," 13 March 1869: 349. The term "snobbery" here should be understood by its nineteenth-century colloquial definition as a vulgar person of a lower social order and not in the more contemporary sense of a person who believes himself or herself to be socially superior to others.  

could have been better performed, but which fails to incur the same wrathful response. Indeed even the audiences at the theatre in Shoreditch, which despite not appearing "imbued with the fine arts, to the extent of having their manners softened," were "very quiet and appreciative."\textsuperscript{107} The tradesmen and mechanics at the theatre exhibited as much docility as the music hall tradesmen and mechanics did vulgarity and social devianace, and yet the fare was every bit as much divorced form the "legitimate" drama as was that in the halls. Furthermore the author did not explain why the uneducated audiences of Shoreditch did not have as much of a morally debilitating effect on the burlesque and pantomime in the theatres as the audiences in the music hall allegedly had on the comic singers and sketch artists. In fact, where \textit{All The Year Round} called for a more active intervention with the music halls on the part of the Lord Chamberlain, it was hesitant to do so with the theatres. The public was a great self-censor, wrote the author, and "will learn what it is they ought to avoid, and so will innocent managers, untouched by your Lordship's anger, reap the reward of their virtuous actions."\textsuperscript{108} The self-censorship of the music hall audience was a non-starter.

Such contradictions suggest only one conclusion: that the author's bias against music halls was so strong as to leave such aporias transparent. To \textit{All The Year Round}, at least in 1869, the audience of music hall was irreversibly corrupted, caught in a cycle by which their own natural proclivities were fed by the poison of an "illegitimate" entertainment continually maintained, bolstered and encouraged by those self-same proclivities. Indeed the music hall audience was seen as a class within a class, the hard-core uneducables, a dangerous and subversive presence beyond the control of the social arbiters. The theatres,

\textsuperscript{107} "To The Lord Chamberlain," 20 March 1869: 373.

\textsuperscript{108} "To The Lord Chamberlain," 20 March 1869: 375.
regardless of the actual nature of the fare presented by the managers, was a force for social control, an opiate and an exemplar of the ways in which true "Art," even when badly executed, could soothe the savage beast.

By 1892 it was clear that the respectable theatres of the West End had laid claim to the mantle of Art, and that British magazines had helped it to do so. The social hierarchy of performance had been established, with the West End on top, the transpontine houses below, and the music halls on the bottom. The theatres, even the working-class houses, could be instruments used for the betterment of the commonweal and for the promotion of middle-class goals; the entertainments in the halls were at best a mindless diversion, and at worst, an insidious wasteland of aesthetic and moral corruption.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Clearly the nineteenth-century periodical press was a major influence in the shaping of public taste and in the influence of public opinion concerning the drama and the stage. While the influence of magazines predates the nineteenth century, it was in the 1800s that mass distribution of periodicals became possible and an explosion in periodical readership occurred. The technology for mass distribution made possible an increase in the influence of the magazine press several orders of magnitude beyond that which it had enjoyed in the eighteenth century, and allowed periodicals to assume a major role as social arbiters and formulators of opinion.

The principal aim of this study was to examine the role of the periodical press in the legitimation of certain types of performance and certain categories of theatre, and specifically the ways in which the process of legitimation was bound to the concept of middle-class respectability. In this it has been successful to the extent that it has shown the ways in which the eclectic press operated (and continues to operate today) as an ideological state apparatus,¹ that is, an organ independent of the repressive apparatus of the state, but one which serves to make certain artificial constructs (the "theatre," "respectability," "legitimacy," etc.) appear as "natural" and "common-sense" truths.

In making this comparison, I may be leaving the study open to accusations of reductionism with regard to theories of power relations, but I make no argument favoring a view of the eclectic press as a simple one-way transmitter of propaganda. And while I would argue that the rhetorical effort to define "legitimacy" was in some ways a contest for the control of working-class leisure, I would reject any suggestion that those who were the objects to-be-controlled lacked any recourse or any means of resistance. Unlike Althusser and other Marxist and Neo-Marxist scholars I would argue, as Patricia O'Brien has written in an essay on Michel Foucault, for a theory of power relations which "dismisses the totality of Marxists and Annalistes alike, not in favor of plurality but in favor of interplays, correlations, dominances ...." Arguing that Foucault's view of Western civilization revolves around "the organizing principle of power," O'Brien argues, as I would, that power "exists as an infinitely complex network of 'micro-powers,' of power relations that permeate every aspect of social life." The influence of Victorian periodicals cannot be doubted, given their rapid expansion and wide circulation; but they were but a single nexus of power. To argue for the respectability of actresses, as some periodicals did, was to acknowledge resistance to that argument; to criticize the music halls for promulgating inferior entertainment was to acknowledge that such an argument was not persuasive with a very large segment of the population--the segment which flocked, apparently with little regard for the opinions of the press, to buy tickets to those music hall entertainments. The "unfashionable" audiences, theatres and music halls had their power bases too.

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3 O’Brien, 34–35.
That caveat being understood, the study demonstrates a number of insights into the role of the press as a definer of taste and a formulator of opinion. It is undeniable that audience demographics changed markedly during Victoria’s reign, that theatre-going became much more acceptable to people whose parents and grandparents would never have approved of doing so themselves, and that the vocation of the actor became, as the century drew on, more and more a profession into which a gentleman or respectable woman might enter. In this sense, the British stage underwent a remarkable transformation—some would suggest rehabilitation—during the nineteenth century. But these demographic and social trends were dependent upon rhetorical definitions, the nature of the term "respectability," and the parameters of the "legitimate". The rhetoric of the press, like the rhetoric employed in the Select Committee hearings, is not hard data. One cannot interpret the words of a Kemble or an Archer, or of an anonymous periodical writer without taking into consideration the underlying ideological constructs behind those words. A study of the rhetoric of the press suggests that the nineteenth-century theatre’s rehabilitation took place as much on the printed page as it did in actual practice. The demographic changes so central to the history of the nineteenth-century London stage were, of course, very real, but it was the rhetoric of respectability and legitimacy that provided the paradigm through which those trends were understood, and it was the press which played a major role in defining that paradigm.

Central to this rhetorical rehabilitation of the stage is the concept of legitimacy, the "lawfull boundaries" alluded to by lexicographer John Bullokar (see Chapter 1, pp. 7). When Ernest Bradlee Watson wrote in his history of the London stage that the early-century London Theatre was plagued by a distasteful diversity in entertainment,^4 he implied that the "regular" or "legitimate" drama experienced a triumph by the end of the

century, in as much as it lured those with good taste and breeding back to the theatre. That there was a diversity in entertainment was certainly true—Shakespeare and Sheridan competed with aquatic entertainments, horsemanship, pantomimes, etc. But by the end of the century London played host to an equally diverse spectrum of stage fare. The plays of Arthur Wing Pinero, H.A. Jones and George Bernard Shaw competed with music hall acrobatics, novelty acts, sketch comedy and the spectacle of the pantomime. By the 1890s the question was not simply what forms of entertainment constituted legitimate theatre, but what class of audience conferred legitimacy through its attendance. The magazine press played a major role, not only in defining legitimacy, but in defining the role of the respectable class as the legitimating class.

The conclusions of the study are four-fold. First, the evidence is clear that the magazine press was enthusiastic about and supportive of the theatre even in the early years of the century when anti-theatrical prejudice was common within influential segments of British society.⁵ If the theatre had become so disreputable during the Georgian period and the Regency, why then are there so many favorable references to the theatre as an institution in influential periodicals of the era? Where is the anti-theatrical prejudice that one might expect to find in magazines in the 20s and 30s? The theatre as an institution (if not always in practice) is vigorously defended in the press during the early part of the century. Of course, a defense is only necessary during an attack, and the existence of anti-theatrical sentiment within certain segments of early Victorian society is not contested. But such mainstream publications as *Monthly Review* and *Bentley's Miscellany* were so squarely in the camp of the theatres that one might falsely infer anti-

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theatricalism was relegated to the fringe of Victorian consciousness, if not marginalized completely. Such was the breadth of support that the theatre enjoyed.

The study also suggests that the press was not only involved in the legitimation of the actor's profession and attendance at the theatre, but indeed was involved in a process of legitimating the legitimators, i.e., the middle class itself. If the presence of a middle-class audience was a factor in the legitimation of certain entertainments, then the press was a major factor in the legitimation of that class. A case in point is the press's discussion of censorship and its tendency to downplay the importance of the official Censor while promoting the potential for middle-class self-regulation with regard to the propriety of the stage. The respectable classes, by virtue of their respectability, were in no danger of being morally or politically corrupted by the stage and had no need of any paternalistic oversight. Indeed, they were to be the authors of a new paternalism, one focused ostensibly on the welfare of the working-classes and working-class entertainment.

The press legitimated the vocation of the actor in a variety of ways, even if those attempts at legitimation contained significant contradictions. Actresses were vaunted for their domestic qualities, but also for their sexual charms; actors were often portrayed as hard-working and respectable business people, but were at the same time exoticized, with their more "colorful" qualities on exhibit almost as if they were ethnological objects of study. It is also clear that the press divided the community of theatrical practitioners into at least two classes. Luminaries of the stage were invariably treated with more respect and were given credit for much greater moral attributes than the great mass of stage practitioners, who were viewed more as a class of exotic persons or as "types." When students of theatre history correctly cite Henry Irving's knighthood or Charles Kean's elevation to Master of Revels as watersheds in public opinion regarding actors, it is clear that these watersheds held much more import for the stars of the period than for the working practitioner.
The respect afforded such prominent actors as Henry Irving and Ellen Terry at the end of the century is evidence that historians such as Michael Baker are correct in asserting that the stage was viewed more and more as a profession in the latter half of the century, a trend which reflected growing numbers of other disciplines which began to claim professional status during that time. But again, an argument made in favor of a proposition implies an argument against. When Hamilton Aidé proposed an academy for dramatic training in 1882, it was in part a swipe at the amateur actors who threatened to trivialize the profession, but it was also an answer to F.C. Burnand's contention that stage had not yet attained professional status. Irving's notes on Shakespeare for The Nineteenth Century contain sophisticated textual analysis, written in part to satisfy reader interest in the subject, but also as an argument for the rigor of the actor's craft, rigor that was undoubtedly called into question by people such as Aidé. To assume a monolithic acceptance of actors as professionals and their vocation as an undisputed profession, is clearly problematic.

Finally, the study demonstrates that the process of legitimation is a process of exclusion as well as inclusion. The late-century theatre was, as noted above, every bit as diverse in form and content as it had been 60 years earlier. But unlike the London stage of 1832, the theatre of fin de siècle Britain had become much more highly segregated by class, and it was class that became the deciding factor in the determination of legitimacy. Music hall audiences, the study shows, had, in the opinion of the social arbiters, neither taste nor discernment, and their lack of discrimination led to the debasement of music hall entertainments. Conversely, these same entertainments affected the audiences adversely and the result was a "popular" performance form which could in no way be categorized under the rubric of Art. These same working-class patrons, however, posed no such danger to the "legitimate" stage; on the contrary: it was the legitimate stage which could be the salvation of the mob, a rational entertainment designed to amuse, instruct, control and contain.
Obviously I have left a number of related avenues unexplored, and the general area of the dissertation leaves much for future scholars to investigate. Necessity has limited the periodicals used in the study to the eclectic press and to a limited sample of that genre. In the interests of space I have largely ignored literary periodicals and the press's prodigious output of articles devoted to playwrights and dramatic literature. Professional magazines, too, have been excluded. It would be an interesting project to study the ways in which the specifically theatre-related press, those magazines devoted to a readership of theatre professionals and to the hard core of aficionados, either incorporated or rejected the rhetorical legitimation strategies used by the mainstream press. Daily newspapers, too, are an enormous resource that has yet to be widely investigated with regard to the legitimation of theatrical practices.

And what of American magazines? Much is made of the parallel development of the nineteenth-century American and British theatre, and of the slavish imitation by American theatre practitioners, managers and playwrights of their British counterparts. But theatre in the United States did not operate under a tradition of official government censorship (ad hoc censorship is another matter) nor was there a history in America of complex legislation regulating entertainment. Class, too, had and still has much different connotations in the United States than in Britain. In light of these key differences, a study of the American theatre as reflected by the American press may prove an interesting project.

And also, what of the working-class press and the workmen's journals? Such periodicals have not been preserved as thoroughly as more mainstream publications, and would be difficult to locate. But once examined, they may prove an interesting study in the ways that working-class journalists either resisted or were co-opted by mainstream images of working-class audiences and entertainments. Workmen's newspapers and
journals such as those chronicled by Aled Jones, did indeed devote space to the pursuit of working-class leisure, but the extent to which these periodicals concerned themselves with the theatre or music hall remains to be seen.

Social dynamics have changed much since the time of Victoria and the vocabulary of our social discourse has changed along with them. The notion of respectability, for instance, resonates far less and in different ways today than it did in 1892. But the processes which rule the dynamics of taste remain very much the same today, and the rhetoric of the press, print journalism as well as the many other media which bombard the public on a daily basis, still plays its role as a legitimator of cultural practice. If the prestigious American downtown repertory company has less trouble raising contributions or drawing full houses than the smaller neighborhood theatre of similar quality, or if London’s West End remains the principal destination for thousands of theatre-going tourists, it is in large part because these institutions have been legitimated by the press and other media organs. It still matters which performance venues the New York Times or The Times of London decide to cover. The process of legitimation is continual, and the rhetoric of the press remains a most powerful force in the formulation of public taste.

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