

# ARTICLES

## Early Nineteenth-Century Theatre in Manchester

*Katherine Newey*

Today, inside the Royal Exchange Theatre in central Manchester, it looks as if a giant steel pod has landed from the sky, lowering itself in through the main cupola. This self-contained stage and seating structure stands within the high, light, and airy space of the Royal Exchange. It was the largest room in the world<sup>1</sup> of the nineteenth century, where the prices for cotton, before the Exchange closed as a place of commercial business, are memorialised high on the wall above what is now the café. The space is spectacular now and must have been so in the nineteenth century when it was crowded with the dark-suited dealers in the commodities of Manchester's wealth, instead of the well-heeled middle class and middle-aged theatre-goers of the early twenty-first century. Although it is now a state-subsidised producing theatre organisation, running a busy and well regarded repertoire which provides 'high-brow' theatre – in contrast to the Palace Theatre on Oxford Road with its unsubsidised and populist mix of long running West End musicals and short seasons of ballet and pantomime – the Exchange's links with commerce are embedded in the building and its operation. As well as the café and bar, there is a craft shop, a book shop and a costume hire service, and throughout the building brass plaques are set into the floor and on the backs of theatre seats noting individual or corporate sponsorship. For all its high cultural connections, the carefully selected programming mix of new writing and British and European classic plays, and the importation of actors who work at other national subsidised theatres, the Royal Exchange Theatre is inextricably linked to both local and national economies. In the twenty-first century the Royal Exchange trades within the regional and national creative industries, generators of Manchester's late-twentieth century renaissance. But this is only to continue the relationship between commerce and art which was a central element of the cultural politics of Manchester theatre in the nineteenth century.

In this essay I want to pose what I think are the important questions for a history of theatre in Manchester in the nineteenth century. And at this point I find I have more questions than answers, as integrated

cultural and social histories of theatre outside London are rare. Most extant studies are local and antiquarian in emphasis, notwithstanding the excellence of their data collection and empirical research.<sup>2</sup> But in the last ten years, the emergence of the 'New Theatre History' represented by nineteenth-century theatre historians' work on theatre audiences, or concepts of 'illegitimacy' in London culture, the economic underpinning of all theatrical activities, or the historiography of the English stage,<sup>3</sup> requires a different set of questions from the earlier who, what, when and where of Manchester theatre. To start to answer these questions, I will trace in rough outline some of the significant themes which emerge from a grounded study of the theatre as entertainment, business, and arena for the playing out of cultural and party politics. My concern here is not with dramatic literature, nor am I concerned to look for an indigenous Manchester style or school of playwriting. Indeed, I find the absence of a 'Manchester school' of playwriting for most of the nineteenth century to be a significant indicator of the particular nature of Manchester theatre, and its relation to the metropolitan centre of London. The questions which I wish to pose – but only partially answer in this essay, in the hope that others will pick up the enquiry – revolve around those relationships between cultural production (using sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's term) and cultural politics in Manchester during the rapid industrialisation of the nineteenth century. My interest in the process of industrialisation, and its cultural forms, means that I focus my attention in this essay on the first half of the nineteenth century. In this period, what forms of organisation did the theatre take in Manchester? And what were the connections between the imagined geography of the new industrial nation as played out on the stage, and the material conditions of cultural production taking place in industrial centres such as Manchester? I find the gist of these questions reflected in a contemporary statement by Archibald Prentice, introducing his wonderfully titled *Historical Sketches and Personal Recollections of Manchester, Intended to Illustrate the Progress of Public Opinion from 1792 to 1832*:

we can never have a satisfactory exposition of the progress of England, in social ameliorations and political independence, until we have special histories of it in every important district.<sup>4</sup>

But inevitably, I need to ask how this cultural history of the 'important district' of Manchester related to that of London, as both a cultural and a legislative centre. For London was a generative cultural centre for Manchester, as much as Mancunians then and now might wish to minimise this. I need to consider what kind of conversation emerged between the cultural élites of London and the distinct

cultural life of the North of England. If these questions are rather too focussed on relations between Manchester and London for the tastes of staunch regional historians, then that is in part because much of the legal and economic organisation of theatre in England particularly, and Britain generally, was assumed to be London-centred, and that is still the case for most theatre histories of the period. This is quite clearly an imbalance which distorted, and continues to distort, British cultural history and modern cultural activities. But rather than ignore this imbalance, perhaps we should seek to interrogate it, in order to develop a truly inclusive picture of the National Drama in the nineteenth century. For it was within the frame of the 'National Drama,' as both a repertoire of dramatic literature and a cultural construct, that contemporary discussion of Manchester's theatrical life in the first half of the nineteenth century was conducted.

The debate over the National Drama, and its decline (or otherwise) was one which exercised the metropolitan 'literati,'<sup>5</sup> particularly in the agitation over the monopoly of the Patent system from the late-eighteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth century. This is a complex history, not least because since the establishment of permanent public theatres and acting companies in the late-sixteenth century, the British theatre has always been subject to a complicated mix of legislative and administrative control, combined with customary practices and entrenched economic interests. In 1737 the Theatres Licensing Act fixed the position of the Theatres Royal at Drury Lane and Covent Garden as the only two theatres in London permitted to present the repertoire of spoken drama in English – other theatres were limited to 'music and dancing'.<sup>6</sup> This monopoly derived from the letters patent awarded to Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant by Charles II in 1662, and the Royal Patent was held to give exclusive rights to the production of the English drama in London to the Theatres Royal and to prohibit any other theatres in London from performing the spoken drama. As well as attempting to regulate London theatre, the 1737 Act also required that plays performed in public theatres be licensed by the Lord Chamberlain and his Examiner of Plays, effectively instituting censorship over the words spoken on stage anywhere in Britain until 1968. In practice, the Patent monopoly also protected theatre managers and proprietors when trading, investing in, borrowing against, and bequeathing property rights:<sup>7</sup> in most disputes over infringements on the presentation of the spoken or 'legitimate' drama, managers referred principally to the threat to their incomes and proprietors to the devaluing of their investment in the Theatres Royal if other theatres were allowed to compete with them.<sup>8</sup> Through this complicated thicket of legislation, professional practice and

theatre lore, the Patent monopoly (which, as Tracy Davis has argued, was an oligopoly rather than a true monopoly<sup>9</sup>) became symbolic of a particular type of theatre, which carved out its claim to legitimacy and national representation in a series of discursive moves, underpinned by complicated legal arguments and professional custom.<sup>10</sup>

The 1737 Act, while applying principally to the theatre industry of London, had an impact across the country which was in part legislative but also affected professional and industrial practices. Manchester's public theatres were subject to the same conditions of licensing and censorship, and also required legislative permission for the privilege of the use of the title 'Theatre Royal'. That this title carried with it remarkable cultural capital is evident from the practice across the country of taking the name of Theatre Royal without the permission of the Lord Chamberlain.<sup>11</sup> Challenges to the Patent monopoly were at their most intense between 1832 and 1843, but began in the eighteenth century as theatrical managers, always and necessarily entrepreneurial, saw the growing populations of early industrialising towns as potentially lucrative audiences. In Manchester, a bill for the establishment of a Theatre Royal was presented to Parliament in 1775, and a license for 21 years awarded to Joseph Younger and George Mattocks. The establishment of this theatre consolidated the various theatrical activities of Manchester, usually related to other events in the town, such as the Whitsuntide holidays or the regular lodging of soldiers in or near the town. Travelling companies visited Manchester on their provincial circuits in the mid-eighteenth century, as did visiting singers and recitalists. J. L. Hodgkinson tells the story of his search for evidence of the first purpose-built theatre building in Manchester, and its establishment from 1750,<sup>12</sup> but it is was the status Theatre Royal, formally bestowed by Parliament, that Manchester theatre professionals sought. Theatre history here provides an interesting gloss on party political agitation in the period by reminding us of the extent of political action beyond the sphere of Parliament, and demonstrating the way that cultural production also contributed to national recognition and representation of a town, a class and a people.<sup>13</sup>

The passing of a bill by the House of Lords

to establish a Theatre in Manchester, to keep a company for his Majesty's Service, and to act such Tragedies, Plays, Operas, and Entertainments only as had been or should be licensed by the Lord Chamberlain of His Majesty's Household<sup>14</sup>

formalised and recognised Manchester's status as a significant cultural centre. The question which then exercised managers and critics

(although in different ways) was what happened within that theatre's walls? The theatre run by Mattocks and Younger presented a standard repertoire, mixing classic comedies and tragedies – the 'legitimate drama' they were entitled to produce by the Parliamentary Act – opening with *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *The Tempest*, as well as *The Rivals*, *As You Like It*, and *The Provok'd Wife*.<sup>15</sup> That first Theatre Royal was run by various managers, surviving fire and internal rebuilding and competition from Astley's circus, as well as events in France.<sup>16</sup> The end of the 21-year term of the first Patent in 1807 precipitated a change in management and new building; the new theatre in Fountain Street was larger, seating around 2,000 spectators,<sup>17</sup> but the new managers, William Macready (father of the more famous actor-manager William Macready) and after him Elliston, both had trouble covering their expenditure.<sup>18</sup> Although actors were paid very low salaries of around £2 per week during the season,<sup>19</sup> and had to rely on their benefit nights (when they got a substantial share of the box office takings) each season to supplement their meagre wages, rent, taxes and local rates, combined with a theatre industry in Manchester which was particularly sensitive to local economic conditions, meant that financial struggles dominated managements of the Theatre Royal in the early years of the nineteenth century.

Theatre Royal,  
Manchester  
(Manchester  
Archives and  
Local Studies  
M06631)

Once there were two established theatre buildings in Manchester – the new Theatre Royal in Fountain Street and the old Theatre Royal in Spring Gardens, now known as the Minor Theatre – the questions of competition or market definition and delineation arose (and this is



without any consideration of various temporary theatres, such as Astley's circus or Bradbury's Amphitheatre). In its time at Spring Gardens, the Theatre Royal company had relied on novelties and topical pieces. However, with two permanent theatres, one holding the official title of Theatre Royal, the other having held it for over twenty years, the question of what each theatre should produce, and how each management sustain its market share, was to exercise critics and theatre professionals. There had already been some controversy over what the managers of the Theatre Royal had promised and what they delivered,<sup>20</sup> with local pamphleteers arguing that the 'town of Manchester, from its celebrity in the drama, is entitled to expect' the managers of the Theatre Royal to form 'an immediate engagement with some performer of distinguished talents, and adequate to support the first line of characters'.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the delineation of different repertoires and different audiences exercised the theatre industry in Manchester until the 1860s, when changes in national patterns of theatre production from repertory programmes with short seasons and a high turnover of novelties – to longer runs using star actors and a high level of investment in costumes and settings – became entrenched. In 1847, at the end of the period I am interested in, a critic writing for the *Dramatic and Musical Review* engaged in a lengthy consideration of the prospects of the Queen's Theatre, the former Theatre Royal and then Minor Theatre, whose manager Mr Sloan had just been made bankrupt. Starting by confirming that 'we consider that the people of this large community *do* require a second theatre for the representation of the regular drama',<sup>22</sup> the writer then proceeds to delineate the ways in which two managements could co-exist profitably. This could only happen if 'the two managers ha[d] an understanding that they should each keep to a distinct and defined class of performances when both are open'.<sup>23</sup> The writer then makes a clear distinction based on the principles of 'legitimacy' and the enduring cultural capital of the award of the Patent to Manchester's Theatre Royal, even though the 1843 Theatres Regulation Act removed the legislative constraints on theatres without Patents across the country:

we are to consider what class of performances are most likely to be attractive to the public, and remunerative to the proprietor of 'The Queen's'. These we conceive to be comedies, domestic dramas, operettas, farces, vaudevilles and extravaganzas, with, occasionally, a well written melo-drama. Tragedies and spectacles, requiring great space on the stage, and aiming both at scenic effect and optical illusion, ought not to be attempted, as in such a walk, a small theatre cannot compete with a large one. [...]

The writer commented on the importance for managerial profit of two specific groups within the audience:

We believe that a higher class of entertainment would be appreciated by the working classes of our town, and that a little more faith in the good sense of the audiences would not be without benefit to the manager. [...] The dress circle should be made to assimilate to the elegance of a drawing room, and should be furnished with comfortable dressing and retiring rooms. At the same time it would be necessary that there be a greater decorum in the arrangement of the upper circle than has hitherto been observed, as otherwise, ladies, upon whose good opinion theatrical success is more dependent than is generally acknowledged, will not be found willing to afford *their* patronage.<sup>24</sup>

By the middle of the century in Manchester, the language of respectability was joined to an acknowledgement of the central importance of commerce to maintaining and developing Manchester's theatre industry.

While the Theatre Royal continued with its programmes mixing the classic English repertoire with new plays and pantomimes, the Minor Theatre presented a different repertoire for what was thought to be a different audience (although there is as yet little evidence to support this contemporary assumption). As the desire for sensation and novelty grew in the 1810s and 20s,<sup>25</sup> the Minor Theatre reproduced a number of London sensational hits, such as *Attalpa, King of the Red Deserts; or, the Fatal Shipwreck of the Medusa*,<sup>26</sup> which suggests, by its title, that it was a version of William Thomas Moncrieff's melodrama, *The Shipwreck of the Medusa; or, The Fatal Raft*<sup>27</sup> which dramatised the subject of Géricault's painting, *The Raft of the 'Medusa'*. Both play and painting were based loosely on the actual events of 1816, when the French ship *La Méduse*, carrying soldiers and settlers to the French colony of Senegal, foundered in shallows and was wrecked. Published accounts of the shipwreck included stories of murderous foul play, panic, near-mutiny, and, most sensational of all, cannibalism. Moncrieff's melodrama was performed while the painting was on display in London, and although Manchester records do not give specific reference to the London seasons of both painting and play, it would be typical of theatrical managerial shrewdness to exploit any fashion for sensation, even one as distant as London. Before the Dramatic Copyright Act of 1833, scripts were liable to all sorts of plunder and piracy, so attractions could be brought cheaply to regional and minor theatres. A similar act of piracy seems to have occurred with another popular melodrama from the Adelphi (another 'minor' London theatre). In 1827, *The Assassin Labourer* featured in the

Minor Theatre's programme with a cast including the characters Luke the Labourer, Farmer Wakefield, Philip, and Bobby Trot.<sup>28</sup> The character list shows this play to be a reworking of John Baldwin Buckstone's melodrama *Luke the Labourer*, one of the first melodramas to dramatise fraught relationships between the rural world and the new world of work created by industrialisation.<sup>29</sup>

A clear favourite at the Minor Theatre at this time was one of the many versions of *Tom and Jerry; or, Life in London*, based on Pierce Egan's episodic novel *Life in London*, illustrated by the brothers George and Robert Cruikshank. This version played several times at the Minor Theatre throughout the 1820s, and in February 1833 Egan himself took a benefit at the Theatre Royal. R. J. Broadbent writes of the night:

What brought Mr. Pierce Egan to Manchester for a benefit is not very clear, but he went a-benefiting about the country, including a visit to the sister isle. The performance was announced as 'under the patronage and attendance of his numerous friends connected with the Literary, Theatrical, and Sporting World in Manchester.' *Luke the Labourer* led the way [...] This pretty stiff nights' [sic] entertainment finished up (some time on Sunday morning) with the farce of *Fortune's Frolic*, with Raynor as Robin Roughhead.<sup>30</sup>

Manchester's literary and theatrical élite, eager to connect themselves with the cosmopolitan figure of Egan, and perhaps also recognising his connections with Reformist and Radical politics,<sup>31</sup> obviously pushed the boat out in their enjoyment of this evening.

Manchester theatres were alert to the importance of producing London novelties on their own stages with local actors and references. And such plays made up the majority of both the Theatre Royal and the Minor Theatre's repertoires. However, local productions featured frequently and provided another kind of novelty, often spectacular in their combination of local actors performing within recognisably local stage settings. An early example of this was *Manchester Loyalty; or, The Constitutional Association*, produced at the Theatre Royal in 1793 for the actor Congdon's benefit night. This was not a play so much as an evening's performance combining 'Loyal Songs, Sentiments, and Glees' with the exhibition of a painting by a Manchester gentleman-artist of 'the King in Full Stature' representing his attendance at the Church and King Club the next day.<sup>32</sup> The evening was concluded with a 'Constitutional Glee' and 'God Save the King.' In 1793, such demonstrations of loyalty and national solidarity were particularly pertinent, as Britain's campaign against France escalated; despite its later reputation as 'the capital of discontent' and new forms of social organisation<sup>33</sup> during the early part of the Napoleonic period,

# Theatre-Royal, Manchester.

The Public are most respectfully informed, that the Doors will open at **Half-past Six o'clock**, and the performance will commence at **Seven precisely.**

This present **MONDAY, March 16th 1829,**

WILL BE PERFORMED THE CELEBRATED PLAY OF

# OROONOKO

OR, THE

# ROYAL SLAVE.

Oroonoko.....	Mr. WALDRON	Second Ditto.....	Mr. FORBES
Aboan.....	Mr. ELLIS	Third Ditto.....	Mr. OXBERRY
Governor.....	Mr. ROBSON	Fourth Ditto.....	Mr. C. FRANCIS
Blagford.....	Mr. MELVILLE	First Slave.....	Mr. ENGLAND
Stanmore.....	Mr. HAMILTON	Second Ditto.....	Mr. EDWIN
Captain Driver.....	Mr. CRISP	Third Ditto.....	Mr. LYON
Hotman.....	Mr. BENWELL		
First Planter.....	Mr. J. WATSON	Imoinda.....	Miss LAWRENCE

To conclude with the EXTRAVAGANZA BURLETTA (in 3 Acts,) of

# Tom & Jerry;

OR,

# LIFE IN LONDON.

Corinthian Tom.....	Mr. ROXBRY	Gas Light Man.....	Mr. C. FRANCIS
Jerry Hawthorn.....	Mr. H. BEVERLY	Mr. Jenkins.....	Mr. H. M. BEDFORD
Logic.....	Mr. CARTER	Little Jemmy.....	Master J. WATSON
Honorable Dick Trifle.....	Mr. ELLIS	Landlord of the Back Slums.....	Mr. LYON
Squire Hawthorn.....	Mr. CRISP	O'Boozle.....	Mr. J. WATSON
Jemmy Green.....	Mr. OXBERRY	Nabem.....	Mr. CHARLES
Prinefit.....	Mr. HAMILTON	Kate.....	Miss DYER
Regular.....	Master ROXBRY	Sue.....	Miss E. SCRUTON
Mr. Tattersall.....	Mr. SANTER	Jane.....	Miss HUTCHINS
Gullum.....	Mr. PLATT	Mrs. Tartar.....	Mrs. J. WATSON
Cope.....	Mr. FORBES	Fortune Teller.....	Mrs. PLATT
Dusty Bob.....	Mr. EDWIN	Miss Lightfoot.....	Miss E. LANCASTER
Tartar (Constable of the Night).....	Mr. ROBSON	African Sal.....	Mr. ENGLAND

## MASQUERADERS, DANCERS, &C.

Mesdames BROWN, SCRUTON, EDWIN, SANTER, CRISP, SIBERY, NADIN, OXBERRY, &c. &c. &c.

### LIST OF INCIDENTS;—

ACT 1. LIFE AT HAWTHORN HALL. LIFE IN THE COUNTRY.  
 LIFE IN AGITATION. LIFE IN A CHAFFING CRIB.  
**LIFE AT TATTERSALL'S LIVERY STABLES.**  
 Life in Preparation. Life at **ALMACK'S** in the West.  
 ACT 2. LIFE AT TEMPLE BAR.  
**Life in the Dark. Life in a Watch-House.**  
 LIFE IN THE BACK SLUMS.  
 Act 3. LIFE AT A FORTUNE TELLERS.  
 LIFE AT **ALMACK'S** IN THE EAST.  
**LIFE AT LOGIC'S CHAMBERS. LIFE AT A CARNIVAL.**

# A GRAND DISPLAY OF FIRE WORKS!!!

On TUESDAY, Colman's Play of the **IRON CHEST**. With other Entertainments.  
 On WEDNESDAY, the THIRTEENTH FASHIONABLE NIGHT this Season, will be revived the Musical Play, called the **FREE KNIGHTS; OR, THE EDICT OF CHARLEMAGNE**. With a New Farce, and other Entertainments.

The **BOX-OFFICE** is open EVERY DAY, from 11 o'Clock 'till 2. when Places may be taken.  
 LOWER BOXES, 4s.—UPPER BOXES, 3s.—FIT, 2s.—GALLERY, 1s.

PRINTED BY JAMES PHENIX, BOW-STREET, BACK KING-STREET.

Playbill for a Theatre Royal performance of Moncrieff's *Tom and Jerry*, 1823

Manchester was a staunchly loyalist and monarchist town – at least, so far as the Theatre Royal as a public institution represented Mancunian interests. War fever gripped the Theatre Royal – later that season company actor and dramatist Thomas Dibdin Merchant provided another occasional piece for a colleague’s benefit: *Snip’s Return from the Camp; or, The Manchester Marine*, a ‘political, comical, vocal, rhetorical Interlude.’<sup>34</sup> However, the rapidity of the change from public performances of loyalty to the crown in 1793 to public defiance of such protestations in 1819 (see below for my discussion of Henry Hunt at the Theatre Royal) marks in Manchester’s performance culture the kinds of rapid change in social and cultural relations as well as physical and economic growth which characterised Manchester as ‘the shock city of the age.’<sup>35</sup> The sensational effect of local reference was attested to by the novelty, early in the nineteenth century, of the pantomime *The Preston Guild*. This production was noteworthy because of its claim to documentary accuracy, with representations of The Crescent, Salford, and Getty’s Royal Oak, Manchester, as well as a view of the town of Preston and the set piece ‘an exact representation of the procession of the different corporated trades, cotton spinners, etc., taken on the spot by Mr. Coyle [the company scene painter].’<sup>36</sup> Much later, in 1838, an import from London came to its titular home, with the production of the melodrama *The Dumb Man of Manchester*. Again, the quality of the staging, and particularly the realism of the scenery, was praised but one critic opined that ‘[t]he drama did not fit in so well with the audiences at the Patent house as it had done with those at the Queen’s [the renamed Minor Theatre from 1831].’ The productions in Manchester of *The Dumb Man of Manchester* is a case in point of my contention that Manchester theatre was necessarily in dialogue with that of London. Like other plays which represented the industrial north on the London stage such as Douglas Jerrold’s *The Factory Girl*, John Walker’s *The Factory Lad*, and G. F. Taylor’s *The Factory Strike*, these plays appeared originally in London, and were part of that city’s cultural imagining of the north and its industrial culture. As Robert Gray has argued, ‘[i]ndustrial England became established as an imagined place, a “strategic space” in the circuits of accumulation and exchange.’<sup>37</sup> The exchange here was as much about expressing metropolitan London’s often fearful sense of the alien nature of northern life, a disjunction quite clearly not experienced by those actually living in the north.

Mention of industrial melodramas imagining a north for the audiences of the south returns my focus to the examples of the steady flow of theatrical novelty and sensations from London to Manchester. I would suggest that a national conversation about theatrical culture

emerges. Theatres other than the Theatre Royal, such as the Minor Theatre (the Queen's Theatre from 1831) also had close connections with London 'minor' theatres (i.e. those without Patent rights) through shared repertoire and approach. Part of the demand from public commentators and critics was that Manchester theatre managers kept up to date with London theatrical happenings and offered Mancunians selections from theatrical fashion there. While this could be interpreted as developing a local culture which was subsidiary to and dependent upon the metropolitan centre, the nature of local commentary suggests otherwise. The interchange of shows, actors and playwrights between London and Manchester brought Mancunians into discussions of national theatrical culture in ways that increasingly developed a strong self-image of Manchester and Manchester's distinct local conditions, both cultural and economic. However, these local conditions existed within a national frame, and Manchester theatre professionals and their critics and commentators were clearly aware of this.

The debates which dominated metropolitan discussions of theatre were the linked discussions of monopoly reform and 'the decline of the drama'. These were linked insofar as advocates of the de-regulation of London theatres argued that the quality of dramatic writing and theatrical production would improve; of course, opponents of de-regulation argued that it was only with the protection of the special status of the Theatres Royal to produce the 'legitimate' drama that standards could be maintained.<sup>38</sup> In Manchester, conditions of competition and inflated capital investment in 'legitimacy' were not so fierce as in the capital, but there were continuing concerns about the ways that the town could support and develop a serious theatrical culture. Whereas theatres in London's theatre district increasingly became part of the service economy of tourism,<sup>39</sup> and so were in part cushioned from swings in other parts of the economy, the economic cycles of industry had a direct impact on Manchester theatre-going, particularly from the Reform years to the early 1840s, the period known as 'the Hungry Forties'.

Typical of the growth of a self-conscious and confident theatrical culture in Manchester during this period is a retrospective editorial piece on the occasion of the end of the season and the expiry of the Theatre Royal's lease, written by the theatre critic of the *Manchester and Salford Advertiser* who reflects on the state of Manchester theatre in 1833:

In truth, throughout the three seasons that the theatre has been opened under its present management, it has been miserably supported. And why is this? Has the taste for the drama declined?

Has the company been low in talent? Have the entertainments been low in character? Are the people poor? Are the – in short, what is the cause? <sup>40</sup>

The writer contends that there are several reasons for the poor support of the last season. His (for the critic is inevitably a male writer) first point is that the new theatre auditorium is too large, and performances too frequent, so that audience members found themselves in a thin house without the congeniality of shared physical space as well as shared sensory enjoyment:

Now a small comfortable theatre is of itself an attraction; there is an idea of *snugness* about it which adds much to the cheerfulness and good humour of the audience, where no one is deterred from attending the theatre by an apprehension of a thin house.<sup>41</sup>

But he quickly moves to what might seem more fundamental problems, and in these he echoes commentary on the state of the drama collected across the country by the 1832 Select Committee hearing into the state of dramatic literature:

Then the drama is not the rage – the fashion, as it has been. Time was, that an individual who had not seen a certain piece or a certain actor by a certain time – opportunity offering, would have been formally read out of all respectable society. [...] The drama does not now, as formerly, form a leading topic among the fashionables. An acquaintance with the newest novel, the newest song, or the newest dance, is now more eagerly desired than a knowledge of the merits of a new play. The very moderate average audiences to witness the Hunchback, when Mr. and Miss Kemble, or, more recently, when Sheridan Knowles and Ellen Tree were included in the cast, may be instanced in support of this opinion. Dramatic writing, too, is not much cultivated. Our stock of original modern tragedies is small – and of comedies, still smaller: Mr. Knowles has been the largest contributor in this way. Whether this is *one cause*, or the *effect* of a want of encouragement, we are unable to say: perhaps the action has been mutual.<sup>42</sup>

The actors are not the cause: the writer judges them to have

been such as to warrant a more liberal – a far more liberal patronage than has been bestowed upon them; and we think, therefore, that the circumstances before enumerated – and perhaps others which we may not have mentioned – have been in operation.<sup>43</sup>

On the grounds that there is always a financial or economic reason underlying theatrical success or failure, the writer offers that

[p]overty is another cause. In the high and palmy days of paper money, when a guinea was somewhat more valuable than a pound-note and a shilling, prices were high, but the terms of admission to the theatre were comparatively low. Paper money disappeared, and the prices of almost every thing but theatrical entertainments fell considerably; they remained stationary, and were thus virtually enhanced.<sup>44</sup>

The writer's final recommendations are that the auditorium be reduced in size and ticket prices lowered by as much as one half. He also advocates the production of the minor drama – 'that class of pieces [...] which have met with such decided success at the Adelphi, the Olympic, and other small theatres in London', thus reiterating support for a new type of theatre which we need to recognise as modern in its intimacy, care for the comfort of its patrons, and lighter theatrical fare, in comparison with the emphasis on the legitimate drama required in the Patent houses.

I am interested in the tone of this long article – the writer adopts a confident and knowing persona, commenting with authority on both local Manchester theatre and developments in London. The tone of definite judgement – of actors, repertoire, theatre architecture – implies his knowledge of theatre is by no means limited to that available in Manchester. However, the comparison with London is not made explicit, so there is no sense of a provincial writer berating his home town for its very provincial nature (in the sense that 'provincial' has become a disparaging term in Britain). Rather, he sets Manchester theatre in the same frame as the much larger industry based in London, locating Manchester theatre as part of a national institution – in his discussion of Knowles' work, for example, or the easy judgement of the excellencies of the Kembles and Ellen Tree. That attendance at these performances was poor is not blamed on Mancunian philistinism (a common assumption of southerners) – rather, it is the national fashion of neglect of the theatre which is the problem. Unsurprisingly, what visitors from the London-based literati found as fascinating and alarming in Manchester's vitality and its social organisation<sup>45</sup> is taken as a given by this Manchester-based writer, so the article contains little soul-searching about specific Mancunian problems. Rather, any problems of the Manchester theatre industry are placed in a national frame of reference.

As well as giving rise to these questions of cultural politics and local and national definition through cultural production, Manchester theatres became the sites for the performance of national political campaigns. Across the period, Manchester theatres are sites for resistance to parliamentary authority, in the Reform and Anti-Corn Law

movements in particular. One of the most famous was the confrontation between Henry ('Orator') Hunt and loyal monarchists in the Theatre Royal in 1819. Archibald Prentice retells the story:

On the 25th of January, Hunt made a public entry into Manchester from Stockport, accompanied by the indomitable John Knight; Ogden, characterized by Canning as the 'revered and ruptured'; Mark Wardle, the printer of the *Manchester Observer*, a paper which was established as the organ of radicalism; and a number of others. The procession boasted of many gay flags, a kind of display which Hunt exceedingly liked. The meeting was very numerous and very peaceable, and there was applause enough to satisfy even Hunt; but his appetite grew with what it fed upon, and he must needs appear at the theatre, to have his share of the plaudits usually dealt out there. He went on the following Friday night, accompanied by a number of friends, some of whom, earnest reformers, went reluctantly, thinking that men who were working for national regeneration should not waste their time in idle amusements. He was received with 'great applause' by a portion of the audience, and that excited the ire of another portion. 'God save the King' was called for, to show him the loyalty of Manchester, and, on the pretence that he did not show the usual marks of respect for the national anthem, he was rudely assailed by some military officers and some hot-headed residents, and at length forcibly expelled from the house.<sup>46</sup>

At this point, Manchester Radical Samuel Bamford was involved as Hunt asked him to find some 'stout fellows' to attend Hunt back to the theatre the Monday following.<sup>47</sup> Bamford tells of the crowds blocking the way into the theatre and his conversation with the manager Mr Ward who had decided to close the theatre for the night. Hunt, not to be forfeit of his chance for performance, then addressed the crowd from the box of his coach, advising them that there would be no performance and that they should go home peaceably. But, in a curious forecast of the events to come in August that year in St Peter's Fields, Hunt (in Bamford's words)

entered on some general topics, and with singular bad taste, to say the least of it; (for his impetuosity over-ran his judgment,) he said, 'the authorities only wanted a pretext to let the bloody butchers of Waterloo, loose upon the people'.<sup>48</sup>

In this incident, and Prentice and Bamford's retellings of it, a different view of the theatre emerges. As a place of enjoyment the theatre is suspect for the northern Radicals, instead offering a platform for one individual's tendency to self-aggrandizement. Anxiety about

Theatre Royal,  
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M06650)



the potential for disorder which would harm the cause of Reform underlies both accounts of this incident. Indeed, Bamford notes that a party of 'gentlemen' went searching for Hunt, Bamford and their supporters at the Spread Eagle inn, offering battle, but this was averted because Hunt and his party had gone instead to the Robin Hood. The apparent misfit between 'national regeneration' and the 'idle amusement' of the theatre according to the Manchester players

in this incident is suggestive of some larger issues about specific Radical and Reform traditions in the British regions, and gives a theatre historian pause, when she wishes to make broad statements about the theatricalised nature of politics in this period.

This essay represents my first foray into a much larger project: that of bringing together the insights of scholarship which asks about the cultural work of an institution like the theatre, together with an enlarged understanding of what might constitute that institution – in this case, an appreciation of the specificity of the regional culture of Manchester. However, in this endeavour, to ignore the national frame and the forces driving it would be to tell only a part of the story. In reading some instances of specific Manchester theatre culture within the frame of early-nineteenth century concerns about the state of the drama, and questions of legitimacy and legislation, I hope I have begun to sketch out the national conversation about the theatre, and to have indicated some of the ways that the theatre, as a national institution in the nineteenth century, is important. But there is much more work to do: for example, in tracing local reactions to specific performances both on and off the stage (a microhistory of public representations and performances around Peterloo is one obvious example); or investigating the networks of the men (and some women) of Manchester ‘Literary, Theatrical, and Sporting World,’ some of whose anonymous contributions I have examined here; or perhaps searching for more traces of the lost scripts and settings of local novelties such as *The Preston Guild* or *The Manchester Marine*.

## Notes

1. Cited in T. Wyke and N. Rudyard (comps.) *Manchester Theatres* (Manchester, 1994), p. 51. T. Swindells, *Manchester Streets and Manchester Men* (Manchester, 1907, 3rd series), p. 159, notes that in 1849, after the Exchange hall had been extended to 1737 square yards, it ‘was said to be the largest covered space used for exchange purposes in the world.’ Further extension in 1871 brought the size of the room to 4,465 square yards (p. 161).
2. See, for example, R.J. Broadbent, *Annals of the Manchester Stage* (typescript held in the Theatre collection, Manchester Central Library), J. L. Hodgkinson and Rex Pogson, *The Early Manchester Theatre* (London, 1960), and J.M. Ward, *The History of the Theatre Royal Manchester, 1775–1922* (typescript held in the Theatre collection, Manchester Central Library).
3. My examples are: J. Davis and V. Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing, 1840–1880* (Iowa City, 2001); J. Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840* (Cambridge, 2000); T. C. Davis, *Economics of*

- the British Stage, 1800–1914* (Cambridge, 2000); and J. Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge, 2003).
4. A. Prentice, *Historical Sketches and Personal Recollections of Manchester, Intended to Illustrate the Progress of Public Opinion from 1792 to 1832*, (London and Manchester, 1851), p. x.
  5. A term used by Catherine Gore in a letter to the Duke of Devonshire, 12 Dec. [1850?]. Devonshire MSS., Chatsworth, 2nd ser. 384.16.
  6. See J. Donohue, 'Burletta and the early-nineteenth century English theatre,' *Nineteenth Century Theatre Research*, 1:1 (1973) for how these legal constraints influenced the development of the popular genres of burletta and melodrama and how those terms came to disguise the spoken drama (with very little music or dancing) in the 'minor' or non-Patent theatres in London.
  7. T. Swindells, *Manchester Streets*, ser. 1, notes the sale of the patent of Manchester's Theatre Royal, after the destruction of the Fountain Street theatre by fire in 1844: p. 175.
  8. See, for example, the evidence to the Select Committee into Captain John Forbes, one of the proprietors (i.e. part-owner and investor) of Covent Garden, in *Parliamentary Papers* [hereafter P.P.] 1831–32, vii. *Report from the Select Committee appointed to Inquire into the Laws Affecting Dramatic Literature, with the Minutes of Evidence*. Tracy C. Davis cites the petitions to Parliament for compensation from the managers of the Theatres Royal in Liverpool and Manchester on the removal of Patent monopoly rights with the 1843 Theatres Regulation Act: *Economics of the British Stage*, p. 39.
  9. Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage*, p. 21.
  10. For more detailed discussions of the discursive construction of the 'legitimate' theatre and the 'National Drama,' see Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London*, and K. Newey, 'Reform on the London Stage' in A. Burns and J. Innes (eds), *Rethinking the Age of Reform* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 238–53.
  11. See details of this practice in Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage*, pp. 55–6.
  12. J. L. Hodgkinson, 'The first Manchester Theatre, 1750–1775', in Hodgkinson and Pogson, *The Early Manchester Theatre*, pp. 7–17.
  13. B. Bolton, *Women, Nationalism, and the Romantic Stage: Theatre and Politics in Britain, 1780–1800* (Cambridge, 2001) argues that it was in the Romantic period that the analogy between theatre and nation became ubiquitous, finding in the theatre 'an intermediate public sphere' (pp. 4–5) and remarking on the late-eighteenth century 'view of the English state as a stage': p. 10. See also J. Swindells, *Glorious Causes: The Grand Theatre of Political Change, 1789 to 1833* (Oxford, 2001), and Newey, 'Reform on the London Stage' for extended discussions of the connections between theatre and politics in the Reform movement.
  14. Cited in R. Pogson, 'The first Theatre Royal, 1775–1807', in Hodgkinson and Pogson, *The Early Manchester Theatre*, p. 75.

15. Theatre Royal Playbills held in the Theatre Collection, Manchester Central Library. See also Pogson, 'The first Theatre Royal, 1775–1807' for details of each season.
16. For detail of seasons, repertoire, managers, and actors, see Pogson, 'The first Theatre Royal, 1775–1807'.
17. G. Wewiora, 'Manchester Theatre Audiences, 1807–1844' (unpublished MA Thesis, University of Manchester, 1974), p. 27, gives the following figures for audience capacity in the Theatre Royal: 1807: 2,000; 1828: 1,966; 1843: 2,003.
18. J. M. Ward, *The History of the Theatre Royal Manchester*, chap. 7 (no page numbers).
19. Quoted as the standard salary in *The Argus; or, Theatrical Observer: containing Critical, yet Impartial Strictures, on the Merits and Demerits of the Principal Performers of the Theatre Royal, Manchester, during the Winter of 1804*, No. 5 (26 Jan. 1805), p. 3.
20. *The Theatrical Inquisitor; or an enquiry into what the two worthy managers have promised and what performed* (Manchester, 1804). See Wyke and Rudyard, *Manchester Theatres*, pp. 74–5, for a bibliography of the pamphlet literature generated in this dispute.
21. *The Argus; or, Theatrical Observer*, No. 5 (26 Jan. 1805), p. 3.
22. *Dramatic and Musical Review*, 6 Mar. 1847, p. 144.
23. *Ibid.*, 6 Mar. 1847, pp. 144–5.
24. *Ibid.*, 6 Mar. 1847, p. 145.
25. For discussions of these changes in audience taste and managerial provision, see the standard accounts of early Victorian theatre and melodrama in M. Booth, *English Melodrama* (London, 1965); G. Rowell, *The Victorian Theatre, 1792–1914: A Survey* (Cambridge, 1978); A. Nicoll, *A History of English Drama, Vol. 4: Early Nineteenth Century English Drama* (Cambridge, 1955); E. Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800–1885* (Stanford, 1995); and R. McWilliam, 'Melodrama and the historians', *Radical History Review*, 78 (2000), pp. 57–84.
26. Playbill for the Minor Theatre, 4 Dec. 1820, Theatre Collection, Manchester Central Library.
27. W. T. Moncrieff, *The Shipwreck of the Medusa; or, The Fatal Raft*, (London, n.d.); first performed Monday, 19 June 1820, at the Coburg Theatre, London.
28. Playbill for the Minor Theatre, 23 June 1827, Theatre Collection, Manchester Central Library.
29. For detailed discussion of these 'industrial melodramas,' see K. Newey, 'Climbing boys and factory girls: popular melodramas of working life', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 5:1 (2000), pp. 28–44.
30. Broadbent, *Annals of the Manchester Stage*, p. 505.
31. See my discussion of the 'Pierce Egan Night' at the Coburg Theatre, London, in May 1831, in 'Reform on the London Stage' p. 251.

32. Broadbent, *Annals of the Manchester Stage*, p. 229.
33. A. Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, (Harmondsworth, 1990, repr & rev. edn), pp. 90–2.
34. Broadbent, *Annals of the Manchester Stage*, p. 229.
35. Cited in Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, p. 96.
36. Broadbent, *Annals of the Manchester Stage*, p. 297, and Theatre Royal Playbills, Theatre Collection, Manchester Central Library.
37. R. Gray, *The Factory Question and Industrial England, 1830–1860* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 238.
38. For an extended discussion of the cultural politics of the debate over the Patent monopoly and ‘the decline of the drama,’ see J. Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History*, part 1, esp. chap. 4, ‘Theatre history and Reform.’ For a rebuttal of the notion of ‘decline of the drama’ in economic or aesthetic terms, see Jane Moody’s arguments for the establishment of a vital and innovative ‘illegitimate culture’ in *Illegitimate Theatre in London*. See also Newey, ‘Reform on the London Stage’, pp. 247–8.
39. Davis and Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience*, p. 170.
40. ‘The Theatre: Retrospective and Prospective’, *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 30 Mar. 1833 (no page numbers).
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*
45. Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, p. 93.
46. Prentice, *Historical Sketches*, pp. 147–8.
47. S. Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical* (Manchester, n.d.; 2nd edn), p. 170.
48. Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, p. 175.