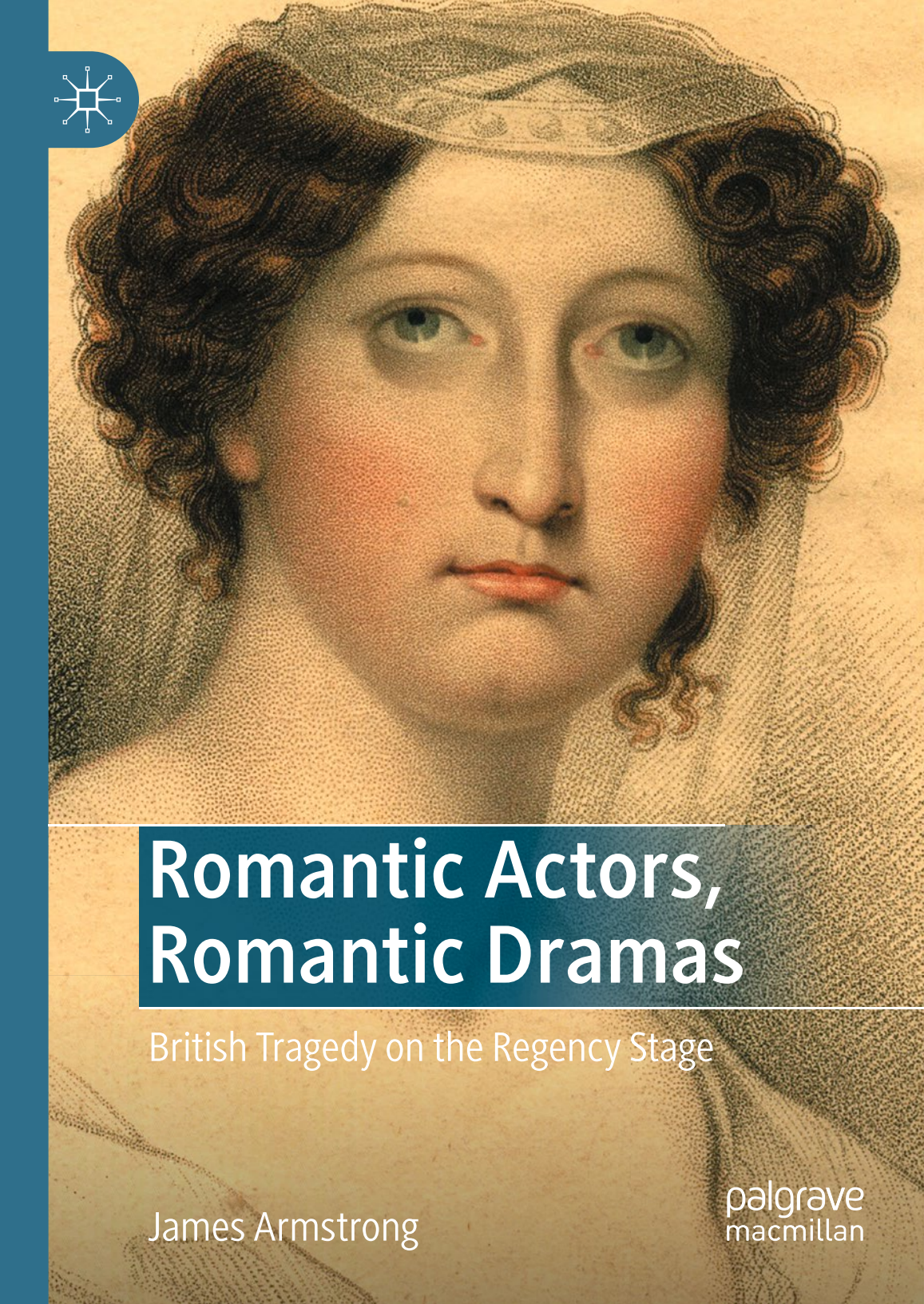




Romantic Actors, Romantic Dramas

British Tragedy on the Regency Stage

James Armstrong

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The New York Public Library is an invaluable institution—especially given that it is free and open to the public. Many years ago, while I was browsing its stacks, I happened upon a copy of Percy Shelley’s *The Cenci*, and in spite of the play’s reputation as a closet drama, I thought I would give it a read to see if it might spark my theatrical imagination. After all, the book was free to borrow, and I could return it right away if I didn’t like it. To my surprise, the play was not a closet drama in the slightest, but was filled with dynamic scenes that I could tell right away would be eminently actable. Coming to Mary Shelley’s note at the end, I read that the play had been originally inspired by an actress named Eliza O’Neill. Who on earth was this woman, and why had I never heard of her? Thus began a long search that led to the creation of this book.

First and foremost, I must thank Judith Milhous, who mentored me through the beginning stages of this project. She encouraged me to follow up on the leads I had found concerning the influence of O’Neill on Shelley, and she also provided several others that would otherwise have escaped me. She encouraged me to prepare my findings for publication and generously read numerous versions of my initial article, which I submitted (under her sage advice) to *Theatre Notebook*. I must also thank Trevor Griffiths, editor of *Theatre Notebook*, for publishing my initial article on O’Neill, “Shelley’s Unsung Muse: Eliza O’Neill and the Inspiration Behind *The Cenci*.” I met Trevor in person at the Society for Theatre Research’s Theatre in the Regency Era Conference at Cambridge

University, which I was able to attend due to a Doctoral Student Research Grant offered by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Trevor encouraged me to submit my additional findings on O'Neill to the journal, which were published in *Theatre Notebook* as "Succeeding the Siddons: Eliza O'Neill and the Triumph of the Romantic Style." I've included material from both of those articles in this book.

As I expanded the scope of the project to encompass other actors and dramatists of the Regency era, I was aided by Marvin Carlson, Annette Saddik, and Jean Graham-Jones, who all offered invaluable comments on drafts. For the chapter on Julia Glover and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, I am indebted to Alan Vardy who welcomed me into the world of Romanticists and helped to steer me in the right direction on a number of occasions. Alan also pointed me in the direction of Deven Parker at the University of Colorado Boulder, and I am grateful to her for sharing her unpublished paper on "The Foster-Mother's Tale." The Society for Theatre Research gave me funding so I could travel to the British Museum in 2017 to study the museum's collection of toy theatres. This led to numerous revelations about Glover's performance as Alhadra in Coleridge's *Remorse*, which I first presented in a paper at the conference of the Association of Theatre in Higher Education the following year. Some of the material from that presentation ultimately made its way into this book.

The chapter on Edmund Kean and Lord Byron was originally developed through a paper I presented at the International Conference on Romanticism in Manchester in 2019, which I was able to attend due to a bursary from the Byron Society. The community of Byron scholars has been incredibly supportive. Christine Kenyon Jones lent her extensive knowledge on Byron and illustration, and Sonia Hofkosh graciously shared with me images of Byron's screen when I had not yet had the chance to examine it for myself. I would like to also thank David Willinger, whose expertise on *fin de siècle* Symbolism has guided my research on the enduring influence of *The Cenci*. Jonathan Mulrooney later published my article on this subject in the *Keats-Shelley Journal*, and while I have not used material from that piece in the present volume, the article continues the story of Romanticism's long shadow that has inspired countless artists.

Throughout this entire process, it was the New York Public Library that was always there for me when I needed it. My work would not have been possible without professionals in the Billy Rose Theatre Division and the Pforzheimer Collection at the library. I also received assistance from

the staff at the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Garrick Club, and the Folger Shakespeare Library. Cate Pennington and Paul Cox went out of their way to welcome me at the National Portrait Gallery, even when it was closed to the general public. The staff at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin helped me to get a digital copy of *Miss O'Neil's Welcome to Kilkenny*, and countless other librarians have greatly aided my research by making otherwise obscure works available online. I am particularly grateful to Marci Morimoto of the Metropolitan Museum of Art for guiding me through how to access Romantic-period newspaper collections, as well as for putting up with my occasional frustrations with technology.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Age of the Actor

In a recent commentary in the *Keats-Shelley Journal*, Terry F. Robinson declared the Romantic age to be the age of the actor. Citing such star performers as John Philip Kemble, Edmund Kean, Eliza O'Neill, and Sarah Siddons, she argued that actors were at the center of cultural life during the Georgian and Regency eras. "These actors attracted, moved, and inspired the period's authors and artists," Robinson wrote, yet "scholarship has only just begun to ask how and why."¹ This book seeks to answer the questions of how and why actors from the Romantic era influenced major writers. The key to understanding that influence is to appreciate the fact that, as Robinson observed, the great literary works of the period were "written with stage production and, given the star system, with specific actors in mind."²

Until recently, most literary historians tended to exalt the latter end of the Georgian Era for its innovations in poetry and the novel, not for its innovations in drama. When scholars examined this period—from the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 to the untimely deaths of John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and George Gordon Byron in the 1820s—they found it to be a golden age of verse and an era of tremendous innovation in novel writing. The core of this period corresponds roughly with the Regency (1811–1820), when the Prince of Wales assumed the responsibilities of his father, George III. Regency literature, which includes books by Jane Austen and Mary Shelley, is not only still read today, but also

continues to shape mass entertainment. A new film based on an Austen novel or a new stage adaptation of *Frankenstein* comes with a built-in fan base. Romance novels set in the Regency era make up an important and lucrative sub-genre of popular fiction. Meanwhile, the former homes of Keats, Shelley, and Byron continue to draw thousands of visitors each year, demonstrating their lasting celebrity even a century later.

Regency theatre, on the other hand, has not always drawn similar attention. When theatre historians have examined the Regency era, they have tended to focus on it as an age of great acting or of impressive spectacle rather than as a period with strong dramatic writing. When Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor published *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre* in 2014, for example, they included eight sections, only one of which focused on writing by canonical authors.³ That section included only 4 essays out of a total of 40, and one of those covered the novels of Jane Austen rather than drama. As Jeffrey N. Cox recently concluded about the period, in spite of much progress that has been made in recent years, “The fact is nineteenth-century drama simply does not matter for most people.”⁴

Even as interest has grown in the study of popular forms of entertainment, more “serious” plays have not always received the same attention as those that were considered during the Regency to be lighter fare. Even theatre historians examining the high culture on display at the Theatres Royal of Covent Garden and Drury Lane have gravitated toward those houses’ more sensationalistic spectacles. Paul Ranger, for instance, deftly discussed the arrival of populist drama in the temples of culture in his 1991 book on gothic drama.⁵ Though Ranger discussed popular spectacles together with ambitious plays like Joanna Baillie’s *De Monfort*, few have followed his lead. Scholars have tended either to look exclusively at popular forms of entertainment in the Romantic era or to view Romantic dramas as detached from the stage. Reeve Parker’s *Romantic Tragedies* does show how writers like Wordsworth engaged with the theatre around them, but more for the insight this gives into the authors’ psyches than into the plays themselves.⁶ Most scholars remain unsure about how to place Romantic dramas—and in particular Romantic tragedies—within the context of the theatre that produced and then rejected them.

This book aims to help place certain dramatic texts of the Regency era that have previously been viewed as somewhat detached from the professional theatre squarely within the context of the era’s system of star performers. The great flowering of verse drama during the Regency came

about specifically due to the prominence of star actors capable of interpreting complex characters and speaking powerful verse. Because late-Georgian theatre was focused on charismatic performers, Regency dramatists wrote character-focused works. These works could have poetic ambition, because the gods and goddesses of the stage not only knew how to handle sophisticated language, they excelled at lofty speeches. Such actors also gravitated toward sympathetic but morally ambiguous characters, as more complex characters gave them a chance to display internal struggle. The great dramatists of the day were crafting their plays to display the strengths of great actors. Furthermore, these writers tended to compose their works with individual performers in mind. Their plays were written not simply for a general style of acting, but for the specific traits, strengths, and celebrity auras of particular actors.

Much has been made of Tom Mole's observation that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the term "celebrity" went from its original meaning designating an event, to describing a quality, to finally denoting a celebrated individual.⁷ More important than the history of the term, however, was the increase during the Romantic era in the use of both the word and the new concepts that the word now carried. Use of the term "celebrity" in English publications spiked at the end of the 1790s and remained high throughout the first decades of the nineteenth century, not significantly declining until after the 1830s.⁸ During this period, we also see an increase in biographies written about actors, published criticism describing their performances, and images depicting them in various roles, all ready for consumption by a public hungry to devour as much as it could relating to these celebrities of the stage. Authors were not immune to this celebrity fever, and dramatists attempted to harness it to ensure the success of their plays.

Hence, in order to fully appreciate these plays, we have to recognize them as living performance texts inseparable from the stage. When investigating great performers, many theatre historians—including Arnold Hare (George Frederick Cooke), Giles Playfair (Edmund Kean), Alan Downer (William Charles Macready), W.W. Appleton (Madame Vestris), Shirley Allen (Samuel Phelps), Carol Jones Carlisle (Helen Faucit), and more recently Judith Pascoe (Sarah Siddons)—have recognized the importance of star actors.⁹ However, they have often overlooked those actors' importance in the creation of Romantic, or Regency-period dramatic texts.¹⁰ This is because Romantic playwrights by and large did not interact with their actors in the same manner as dramatists of previous generations.

When William Shakespeare wrote a part for Richard Burbage, the role was intended for a fellow company member with whom he was on close terms.¹¹ When Aphra Behn planned a role for Nell Gwyn, she meant it to be performed by a friend she knew quite well.¹² When Richard Brinsley Sheridan wrote a play, the entire cast might consist of his own employees.¹³ This was not the case with Romantic writers, who sometimes conceived of roles without ever having spoken to the individuals for whom they were written.

It would be a mistake, however, to claim that these authors did not interact with the celebrity actors who inspired them. As avid fans of star performers, Romantic writers engaged in what the critic Chris Rojek has termed “para-social interactions” with their favorite actors.¹⁴ First identified by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl in 1956, para-social interactions originally referred to “the illusion of [a] face-to-face relationship with the performer” in mass media, including radio, television, and film.¹⁵ While Horton and Wohl were primarily concerned with the new medium of television, later theorists have commented on the para-social interactions celebrities of all kinds have with their fans. Rojek notes that while para-social relationships are a secondary form of intimacy, they can still be a significant aspect of people’s lives and can give rise to deep emotions.¹⁶ As the French critic Antoine Lilti has put it, the attachments formed by fans can become “inseparable from an intimate, personal bond.”¹⁷ Paradoxically, fans can even experience these attachments in a more intensely personal way as they come to be shared by more and more people.¹⁸

Celebrity culture certainly existed long before the invention of television. Though television appears to erase the physical distance between a fan and a celebrity, allowing the image of a star to enter into a fan’s private space, the same was also true of the popular articles and readily available printed portraits which were made much more cheap and accessible by the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁹ According to Rojek, celebrity becomes a public preoccupation as a result of three historical processes: democratization, the decline in organized religion, and the commodification of everyday life.²⁰ All three of these factors were important trends in Regency Britain. In addition, the growth of celebrity culture was fed by technological innovations of the period, including increasingly affordable access to images of star actors in the form of prints and ceramic miniatures.²¹ Far from being contained to the lower classes, these images circulated among all strata of society. Lord Byron, for instance, was so enthralled by celebrity

performers he decorated one side of a scrap-work screen he owned with a collage of prints of his favorite actors.

Playwrights understood the importance of an actor's public persona. As audience members themselves, they knew how audiences perceived the stars they wanted to perform their plays. Consequently, when they crafted characters, writers had to keep in mind how an audience would react to seeing a star performer in a new role. These audiences would relate any new role both to previous roles they had seen the actor perform and to the material images, such as portraits, prints, and miniatures, that helped to fuel fan culture. It was the rowdy, opinionated, sometimes even riotous theatre audience of the Regency stage that dramatists were trying to reach, not the tranquil, idealized reader sitting at home in a closet.

Writers of literary ambition during the early nineteenth century did not shun the stage, but instead wrote about actors, collected images of actors, and above all went to the theatre to see actors again and again. They penned character-focused dramas, with star actors and their particular strengths and talents constantly informing the writing process. As Francesca Saggini has observed, some authors even "plagiarized acting styles and much loved peculiarities" of performers in an attempt to build "new characters based on the interpretations the star actors had given in other plays."²² Thus, the characters brought forth by the Romantic stage were not the sole creations of playwrights. In many ways, they were collaborations between dramatists and the actors who originated the roles. In some cases, the actors who inspired roles did not ultimately perform them, but they nonetheless left an indelible mark upon the plays they helped to bring into existence.

This study takes an in-depth look at four pairs of performers and playwrights: Sarah Siddons and Joanna Baillie, Julia Glover and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Edmund Kean and Lord Byron, and Eliza O'Neill and Percy Shelley. Siddons and Kean are widely known to theatre historians today, but Glover and O'Neill in their own ways have also greatly impacted the history of the British stage, and thus also British literary history. These charismatic performers, knowingly or not, helped to guide the development of a character-based theatre—from the emotion-dominated plays made popular by Baillie to the pinnacle of Romantic drama under Shelley, who created what has been called "the most compelling dramatic character, in all of English Romantic theater," Beatrice Cenci.²³ It was these actors who shepherded in a new style of writing that had verbal sophistication and engaged meaningfully with the moral issues of the day. They

helped to create not just new modes of acting, but new ways of writing that could make use of their extraordinary talents.

Siddons and Baillie are a natural starting point, since their contemporaries considered them to be (respectively) the greatest actor and the greatest playwright of the era.²⁴ Coleridge's play *Remorse* is the next logical step, since not only was it the most successful new tragedy of the Regency period, but it is intimately linked to both Siddons and Baillie. Coleridge wrote the first draft of the play (then titled *Osorio*) with Siddons in mind for the leading role, though she had retired by the time the play premiered. When he later reworked the piece for Drury Lane, Coleridge was following up on the dramatic theories of Baillie, who held that remorse was one of the passions "best fit for representation."²⁵ The success of *Remorse* inspired other authors to write for the stage, including Byron. While Byron's play *Manfred* was not performed during his lifetime, he tailored it to match the stage persona of Kean, the actor most associated with the Romantic style of acting, which was fitting, as Byron's contemporaries considered him to be the epitome of the Romantic writer. Of all the dramas of the period, Shelley's *The Cenci*, which he wrote with O'Neill specifically in mind, has had the largest impact on the history of the theatre, making it a suitable endpoint for this study.

The methodology of performer-centric readings of play texts, while it has rarely been employed for dramas of the Romantic era, has been used successfully to explore the plays of numerous other eras. Scholars have long accepted the importance of individual actors in the shaping of works by William Shakespeare, Aphra Behn, and Richard Brinsley Sheridan. More recently, Jesse M. Hellman has shown how Bernard Shaw used the previous parts played by Mrs. Patrick Campbell when shaping a new role for her in *Pygmalion*.²⁶ While this methodology is certainly not new to theatre research, it is more common in film and media studies. Theories about para-social interactions that originated to discuss television and other forms of electronic mass media apply just as well to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though.

Joseph Roach has already done much to bring celebrity studies to the long eighteenth century, but more can still be done to apply theories of popular culture today to the popular culture of the past.²⁷ As technological changes allowed for the mechanical reproduction of images, state-of-the-art prints, and figurines—the "new media" of the eighteenth century—helped to shape the discourse around actors and the roles they played. These images did not merely document how people perceived performers;

they helped to shape those perceptions as well. As such, they are crucial to understanding how audiences (including playwrights in those audiences) viewed performers. For this reason, each case study here is haunted by a particular image, a piece of material culture that serves as a physical reminder of how contemporaries thought about performers. A mezzotint portrait of Siddons and her son testifies to how she used a doubling of her real and on-stage personas. A toy theatre version of *Remorse* embodies the audience's reception of the two star actresses in the piece. Byron's scrap-work screen reminds us of how Kean's reputation was linked to his own. Finally, a satirical print of Eliza O'Neill shows how she came to symbolize a new set of aesthetics that successfully replaced the values of a previous generation. These material objects provide important clues to how individual performers shaped texts that long outlived them.

Of all the periods of British theatre, the Romantic era seems to have suffered the most from an inability to recognize the connection between text and performance. Lord Byron's famous pronouncement that he wished to write for "a mental theatre" supplied the title for Alan Richardson's landmark study of Romantic drama.²⁸ Fortunately, Richardson tried to resist the assumption that Romantic plays were not meant for performance, but that key image of "a mental theatre" remains. Perhaps it is time for a new paradigm when thinking about these plays. Instead of considering dramas as existing in a "mental theatre" we might position them upon a performer-centered stage.

Romantic tragedies, whether they were performed during their authors' lifetimes or not, can be identified by three key characteristics shared by all the great tragedies of this era: poetic ambition, moral complexity, and a focus on character rather than plot. These are all qualities that necessarily require strong performers if the works are to be brought to life on stage. The ambitious poetry of *De Monfort*, *Remorse*, *Manfred*, and *The Cenci* has to have powerful actors if it is to soar on stage. Moral complexity requires what Joseph Donohue has identified as the subjective turn in characterization that was driven by Romantic actors.²⁹ Most importantly, a drama based on character, as opposed to one driven solely by plot, necessitates great acting. The fact that the Regency era was a time of great acting enabled the flourishing of Romantic drama and indeed might have driven the very qualities that made Romantic drama great.

By the close of the Regency, a new type of play was rising to dominance, and so great would be its popularity that the character-driven works of Romantic drama would all but be forgotten. The emerging genre

known as melodrama ultimately took over the British stage, and the very qualities that made melodrama popular were in some ways antithetical to the Romantic poetic dramas of Regency authors. Michael Booth identified the chief aspects of English melodrama as “complete subordination of character development to the story line, and rigid moral distinctions.”³⁰ To this could be added the fact that melodramas typically reduced the complexity of language to a level that even uneducated audience members were capable of understanding. As Diego Saglia put it, melodrama of the period tended to capitalize on “explicitness and hyperbole” rather than on subtle or complex language.³¹ However, it is the “rigid moral distinctions” identified by Booth that most people think of when they consider what is “melodramatic” today. Even more modern critics since Booth have observed that melodrama seeks out moral clarity, often with simplistic conflicts between good and evil.³² Romantic drama, on the other hand, sought to deal seriously with politics, religion, and ethical decisions, which frequently required a nuance or ambiguity generally avoided by melodrama.

These differences ultimately stem from the largest core difference between the two genres. As Booth observed, melodrama tended to be plot-based, while Romantic drama was character-based. Complex language is usually lacking from melodrama because it interferes with understanding the twists and turns of a melodramatic plot. Similarly, pausing to consider the moral implications of a given decision prevents the audience from enjoying the ups and downs of heroes and heroines struggling to overcome the perils that beset them on stage. As Shaw famously objected to melodrama, the genre tends to be based “on broad contrasts between types of youth and age, sympathy and selfishness, the masculine and the feminine, the serious and the frivolous, the sublime and the ridiculous, and so on.”³³ Though there are notable exceptions, the sensational stage situations in melodrama tend to rely on the audience not thinking too closely about people as individuals rather than as types. Perhaps for this reason melodrama, while it created stars, never produced the grand kings and queens of tragedy seen in the Georgian era.

Historically, it was melodrama that won out in the end, and much of our contemporary entertainment has more in common with melodrama than with the Romantic verse tragedies discussed in this work. Though the term “melodramatic” is still used as a term of abuse, the stage melodramas of the nineteenth century have been critically rehabilitated, beginning with Peter Brooks’s excellent study *The Melodramatic Imagination*. Brooks demonstrated that though melodrama is not always realistic, it

“suggests another kind of reality” for the audience.³⁴ He urged critics “to recognize the melodramatic mode as a central fact of the modern sensibility.”³⁵ Over the decades that followed, that is precisely what many have done. Matthew S. Buckley found the roots of modern theatre in melodrama, which provided “a primary force in the emergence of mass culture” following the French Revolution.³⁶ Melodrama’s influence has spilled over from the stage into film, radio, and—as Juliet John has recently shown—even reality television.³⁷

The great Victorian tragedian William Charles Macready saw his role as fighting against the rising tide of melodrama and reviving the theatre of his time to the splendors of the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages, but instead he presided over government-sanctioned theatres embracing the sensational thrill rides already popular on the “illegitimate” stages beyond London’s patent houses. The last great hopes for the British drama, writers like Robert Browning and Thomas Lovell Beddoes, were turned away from the stage. Playwriting was no longer a serious pursuit, and writers who wished to engage with their audience on a meaningful level usually avoided the theatre. However, the triumph of melodrama did not mean that Romantic verse drama was a dead end. By the 1890s, the theatre had begun to change in ways few people had anticipated. Shaw energized Realist drama in Britain by focusing on character-centered plays that engaged with social issues in ways that were discomfiting to audiences.³⁸ At the other end of the spectrum, Symbolist dramatists in continental Europe were creating an *avant-garde* with linguistically ambitious and morally complex poetic dramas.³⁹ The fact that these two new approaches emerged during the same decade is no coincidence. Both Shaw and the Symbolists were influenced by the Romantic dramatists that preceded them and both had been involved in *fin de siècle* attempts to stage the greatest of the British Romantic dramas, *The Cenci*. Thus, the Regency-era experiments in Romantic drama continued to reverberate throughout the history of theatre.

This book seeks to show the enormous role that performers had in the construction of works for the Romantic stage. The chief qualities of these performer-based dramas—poetic ambition, moral complexity, and focus on character—were by and large not taken up by the popular melodramas that followed them. However, these plays did have a lasting impact, and they merit more attention than they have received in the past. Romantic drama on the Regency stage was intricately connected with the work of performers, and it is precisely because it was connected with the work of

performers that it had such a strong impact on subsequent drama. Thus, the collaborations between actors and playwrights two hundred years ago continue to influence the theatre of today. If we wish to fully understand these dramas, we must examine them not merely as products of a playwright's imagination but as works of art inseparable from the performers who aided in their creation.

Though I have titled the book *Romantic Actors, Romantic Dramas*, my focus here is specifically on spoken verse tragedy. Thus, I have largely avoided discussions of such genres as opera and comedy. Like Romantic tragedy, English opera of the Regency period is often overlooked, though the musical theatre of later eras is indebted to such pieces as James Cobb and Stephen Storace's *The Haunted Tower*, George Coleman the Younger and Michael Kelly's *Blue-Beard*, and Thomas Moore's *The Gypsy Prince* (also written with Kelly). Similarly, the eighteenth-century comic tradition made popular by Sheridan, George Coleman the Elder, Hannah Cowley, and others was continued well into the Romantic era, particularly in the plays of Elizabeth Inchbald, whose works deserve their own full-length study. Such topics are beyond the scope of this book, but are ripe for discussion in the future.

NOTES

1. Terry F. Robinson, "The Romantic Actor as Artist," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 68 (2019): 166.
2. Ibid.
3. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014), ix–xii.
4. Jeffrey N. Cox, "Editing Romantic Drama: Problems of Value, Volume, and Venue," in *The Romantic Stage: A Many-Sided Mirror*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Fabio Liberto (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), 26.
5. Paul Ranger, "*Terror and pity reign in every breast*": *Gothic drama in the London patent theatres, 1750-1820* (London: Society for Theatre Research: 1991).
6. Reeve Parker, *Romantic Tragedies: The Dark Employments of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011).
7. Tom Mole, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), xi–xii.
8. Antoine Lilti, *The Invention of Celebrity*, trans. Lynn Jeffress (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 104.

9. See Arnold Hare, *George Frederick Cooke: The Actor and the Man* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1981); Giles Playfair, *Flash of Lightning: Portrait of Edmund Kean* (London: William Kimber, 1983); Alan Downer, *The Eminent Tragedian: William Charles Macready* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1966); W.W. Appleton, *Madame Vestris and the London Stage* (New York: Columbia UP, 1974); Shirley Allen, *Samuel Phelps and Sadler's Wells Theatre* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 1971); Carol Jones Carlisle, *Helen Faucit: Fire and Ice on the Victorian Stage* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 2000); Judith Pascoe, *The Sarah Siddons Audio Files: Romanticism and the Lost Voice* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2011).
10. While the terms "Romantic" and "Regency" are sometimes used interchangeably, it should be noted that strictly speaking "Romantic" refers to a literary movement while "Regency" refers to a time period. Not all Romantic writers were active during the Regency period, and not all Regency writers were Romantic. However, Romanticism came to be the driving force of British drama during the period I am examining (from Wordsworth's beginning *The Borderers* in the 1790s to the publication of *The Cenci* in 1819), which also roughly corresponds to the Regency era.
11. Studies on the importance of Burbage on the formation of the Shakespeare canon go back at least as far as Charlotte Carmichael Stopes' book *Burbage and Shakespeare's Stage* (London: De la More Press, 1913).
12. Behn dedicated the published text of her play *The Feigned Courtesans* to Gwyn, writing that she possessed "all the charms and attractions and powers" of her sex, as well as "an eternal sweetness, youth and air, which never dwelt in any face" but hers. *The Rover and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), 91.
13. Christian Deelman argues persuasively that with *The School for Scandal* Sheridan "put the play together with a particular cast in mind" in "The Original Cast of *The School for Scandal*," *The Review of English Studies* 13, no. 51 (1962): 257.
14. Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 52.
15. Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance," *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes* 19, no. 3 (1956): 215.
16. Rojek, 52–53.
17. Lilti, 7.
18. *Ibid.*, 10.
19. *Ibid.*, 44.
20. Rojek, 13.
21. Felicity Nussbaum touches on the importance of ceramic figurines of actors in her essay "Actresses and the Economics of Celebrity, 1799–1800" in *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660–2000*, ed. Mary Luckhurst and

- Jane Moody (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 159. Heather McPherson provides a fuller accounting of this phenomenon in “Theatrical Celebrity and the Commodification of the Actor” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832*, ed. Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014), 192–212.
22. Francesca Saggini, *The Gothic Novel and the Stage: Romantic Appropriations* (London: Routledge, 2015), 74.
 23. James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998), 498–99.
 24. See Jeffrey N. Cox’s “Baillie, Siddons, Larpent: gender, power, and politics in the theatre of Romanticism,” in *Women in British Romantic Theatre: Drama, Performance, and Society, 1790-1840*, ed. Catherine Burroughs (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2000), 23–47.
 25. Joanna Baillie, *A Series of Plays: In Which It Is Attempted to Delineate the Stronger Passions of the Mind*, vol. 3 (London: Longman, Hurst Rees Orme, and Brown, 1812), xv.
 26. Jesse M. Hellman, “Lady Hamilton, Nelson’s Enchantress, and the Creation of *Pygmalion*,” *Shaw: The Journal of Bernard Shaw Studies* 35, no. 2 (2015): 213–37.
 27. See Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2007).
 28. Alan Richardson, *A Mental Theater: Poetic Drama and Consciousness in the Romantic Age* (University Park: Penn State UP, 1988).
 29. Joseph W. Donohue, Jr., *Dramatic Character in the English Romantic Age* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970), 5.
 30. Michael Booth, *English Melodramas* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965), 15.
 31. Diego Saglia, “‘I Almost Dread to Tell You’: Gothic Melodrama and the Aesthetic of Silence in Thomas Holcroft’s *A Tale of Mystery*,” *Gothic Studies* 4, no. 1 (2002): 94.
 32. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976), 12.
 33. George Bernard Shaw, “Two Bad Plays,” in *Dramatic Opinions and Essays*, vol. 1 (New York: Brentano’s, 1909), 73.
 34. Brooks, 9.
 35. *Ibid.*, 21.
 36. Matthew S. Buckley, *Tragedy Walks the Streets: The French Revolution in the Making of Modern Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006), 119.
 37. See Juliet John, “Metamodern Melodrama and Contemporary Mass Culture” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Melodrama*, ed. Carolyn Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2018), 289–304.
 38. For a study of the influence of Shelley’s work on the dramaturgy of Shaw’s early plays, see James Armstrong, “Premieres Unpleasant: How the

Infamous Debut of Shelley's *The Cenci* Helped Make Shaw a Playwright," *Shaw* 37, no. 2 (2017): 282–99.

39. For the influence of Romantic drama on Symbolism, see James Armstrong, "'Sublime Vehemence': The Legacy of Shelley's *The Cenci* in *fin de siècle* Symbolism," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 69 (2020): 82–100.



The Progress of British Romantic Drama: A Brief Tour

Visitors to Strawberry Hill, Horace Walpole's estate in Twickenham, are today invited to take a self-guided tour of the distinguished author's old home. In doing so, they trace the steps of countless visitors who have toured the building since Walpole himself opened it to the public, turning the gothic-style country retreat into an attraction for eighteenth-century tourists. In 1784, Walpole even printed a description of his villa to further aid those touring it. According to the itinerary set by Walpole's booklet and still followed by guests today, after visiting the Great North Bedchamber, visitors should enter "The Beauclerc Closet" which is "hung with Indian blue damask, and was built on purpose to receive seven incomparable drawings of lady Diana Beauclerc for Mr. Walpole's tragedy of the Mysterious Mother."¹ The illustrations Beauclerc had drawn depicting scenes from the play were framed and hung on the walls, and in one of the drawers of a writing table, the booklet promised, visitors could find a copy of the play itself, "bound in blue leather and gilt."²

Walpole's drama *The Mysterious Mother* was thus quite literally kept in a closet. The play had been printed privately in 1768 and only shared with a few of the author's friends.³ Though written in the form of a play, Walpole never intended to have *The Mysterious Mother* performed, and indeed wrote in a letter that he was "perfectly secure" it would never be acted.⁴ In one letter Walpole seems to have fantasized about Hannah Pritchard and Kitty Clive reciting parts of the play, but he did so while admitting he was "not yet intoxicated enough with it to think it would do for the

stage.”⁵ Though *The Mysterious Mother* has been performed on a few occasions, the only performance of the play Walpole realistically envisioned was in the imagination of those reading it, while they perhaps also gazed at the few illustrations of the piece he kept in a small hexagonal room. *The Mysterious Mother* was in every sense of the term a closet drama.

That appellation of “closet drama” refers to a play never intended to be performed, and while such a creation might seem anathema to those who study theatre, certain literary-minded individuals from time to time—like Walpole—have wanted to use the form of drama without having their work mixed up in a collaboration with live performers.⁶ The practice of writing closet dramas dates back to classical times, but according to Marta Straznicky, the division of plays into those meant for the stage and those meant to be read at home (in a person’s “closet”) became popularized in the late eighteenth century, around the time of Walpole’s *The Mysterious Mother*.⁷ “Closet drama” accurately describes such purely literary texts as John Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*, which is rarely, if ever, performed. Other closet dramas, such as Henrik Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, were not intended for performance, but have subsequently entered the standard repertoire of regularly performed plays. In the case of *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen had to struggle to accommodate those wanting to perform his behemoth, even suggesting they drop Act IV rather than try to stage the entirety of a massive poem originally meant to be read, not staged.⁸

A play intended for performance but not produced immediately (perhaps not even in the author’s lifetime) is not a closet drama, but such works frequently acquire a reputation for being difficult or even impossible to perform. The dawn of the nineteenth century saw a number of such belatedly produced plays, including Joanna Baillie’s *De Monfort*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Remorse*, Lord Byron’s *Manfred*, and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *The Cenci*. Theatre historians have paid scant attention to these plays because of their perceived closet status, and that same perception has frequently led literary critics to misinterpret them. Time is past due to reclaim these plays as part of theatrical history, both the history of British drama in particular, but also that of Western drama in general. That can only be done if we move beyond the notion that these plays were meant to be read in a closet rather than performed at the Theatres Royal at Drury Lane and Covent Garden.

The powerful plays Britain generated as the nineteenth century was being born are properly called Romantic dramas, not simply because they were written during what has come to be known as the Romantic period,