The Georgian Theatre Audience: Manners and Mores in the Age of Politeness, 1737-1810

(artist unknown, c.1782-1791)

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Contents

List of Illustrations

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For my dad.

Introduction

"We need action not words…to instruct the casual and future audience members as to what is acceptable behaviour – and to assist seasoned theatregoers in encouraging…others."

These words are taken from a Theatre Charter launched in 2014 in response to the perceived "bad behaviour" of UK theatre audiences. It urges readers to sign up and pledge, amongst other things, "to be fully aware of other audience members and their right to uninhibited enjoyment of any production". This includes a commitment to turn off all mobile phones for the duration of a performance, unwrap any sweets before the start of a show or during loud applause, abstain from conversation and "never leave mid-performance unless for medical or emergency reasons".[1]

The charter sets out clearly what is unacceptable behaviour in a 21st century theatre and can be summarised as anything that may impede the "uninhibited enjoyment" of any audience member. Many would applaud such a call to action and, if the charter represents the views of more than just its author, (and the comments that accompany it would suggest that this is the case), a quiet, respectful audience is seen as very important.

The following discussion will move from this starting point of the Theatre Charter of 2014 and ask if it is possible to analyse what constituted acceptable and unacceptable behaviour within the auditoriums of Georgian playhouses between 1737 and 1810. It will look at how the boundaries between the two were negotiated. "Uninhibited enjoyment" may have meant something very different to them.

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[1] R. Gresham, *Theatre Charter*, http://theatre-charter.co.uk [last accessed 28 October 2014]

To put their behaviour into context, a study will be made of the ideas of 'politeness' that can be found in the conduct literature written at the time. Paul Langford has argued that politeness, for the eighteenth-century, is "a key word, with a meaning and implications that open doors into the mentality of a period".[2] In his investigations into theatre during the time of Johnson, James J. Lynch contends that, "the drama may serve…as a kind of social yardstick by which many of the characteristics of the age can be measured".[3] Bearing in mind the importance that these historians have placed on both drama and politeness in the Georgian period, this study will ask how much one informed the other. In an age where politeness was often the key to genteel society[4], how did the conduct of theatregoers affect the perception of theatre more generally? Were they bound by the same rules of politeness that guided other areas of life?

[2] P. Langford, 'The Uses of Eighteenth Century Politeness', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society,* Vol.12 (2002) p.311
[3] J. L. Lynch, *Box, Pit and Gallery: Stage and Society in Johnson's London* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1953) p.vii
[4] Langford, 'The Uses of Eighteenth Century Politeness', p.312

Methodology

The common perception of the theatre audience in the long eighteenth-century is that it was universally raucous and disorderly. In a recent British Library exhibition, entitled *Georgians Revealed: Life, Style and the Making of Modern Britain,* the brief discussion of theatre audiences focused on the "uncomfortable crush" of packed playhouses, "fractious" audiences and, of course, riots. In particular, the Old Price (OP) riots that took place at Covent Garden Theatre in 1809 are mentioned. This is perhaps the event that symbolises for many the Georgian theatre audience. The catalogue does point out that riots were rare, but certainly from the prints and the descriptions, the over-riding impression is at best chaotic, and at worse, downright dangerous.[5]

The year 1737 saw the passing of the Licensing Act. This proclaimed that performances could only take place in licensed playhouses and that plays must be approved by the Lord Chamberlain before they could go be shown. The end of the period in question coincides with the O.P. riots mentioned above, "the last great theatre riot in English history".[6] When John Philip Kemble reopened Covent Garden Theatre on the 18th September 1809, almost exactly a year since it had burnt down, he raised the prices of tickets to the pit and increased the number of private boxes. This decision led to 63 nights of rioting in his new theatre, as audience members defended their right to keep the old prices and a theatre available to more people than just the elite few. The details of these events have been covered elsewhere[7] but as the close to this study, they signal the beginning of the end of the riots that have come to symbolise the audiences of this period.

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[5] M. Goff, 'Theatre and Celebrity Culture', in M. Goff, J. Goldfinch, K. Limper-Herz, H. Peden and A. Goodrich, *Georgians Revealed: Life, Style and the Making of Modern Britain* (London, 2013) pp.88-89.
[6] M. Baer, *Theatre and Disorder in Late Georgian London,* (Oxford, 1992), p.1
[7] See Baer, *Theatre and Disorder,* for a full account and analysis of the O.P. riots

These two events, the passing of the Licensing Act and the O.P. riots, affected theatre audiences profoundly. The first determined what they could watch and where. As will be seen, they did not take kindly to such restrictions. The second is the last time that audiences used such sustained disruption to defend the theatre they loved.

Audiences are often revealed, either *en masse* or as individual characters, incidentally, through the primary sources of the period. They reside in anecdotes found in the letters, journals, memoirs and biographies and histories of the time. Luckily, for the historian there seems to have been a trend for memoir writing among theatrical types and there are many biographies written about the most popular figures. The popularity of the theatre is reflected in how much it was discussed in letters and journals, particularly among the more fashionable echelons of society. For this study, it has seemed prudent to focus on the wealth of printed primary material that exists. Many of these sources run to hundreds of pages and several volumes and the revealing details about audience behaviour are hidden amongst the wealth of other particulars about theatrical life. A lengthier piece of work would allow the time to scour private journals and letters to find further reflections.

It is important to note that, like most theatrical endeavours, certainly before the age of video and audio recording, the audience is an ephemeral and transitory thing. It is made up on each night of a unique combination of people who will almost certainly never occupy the same auditorium simultaneously again. Paintings and prints do survive, and these can give an impression of auditorium layouts, sizes of crowds, fashion and, in some cases, the attitudes of some audience members (see illustrations included for examples). For the most part, however, the historian of the audience is reliant on memory; memories of theatre visits recounted at a later date, sometimes at a distance of some years. There are, of course, more official records to be found, for example in court records, and these will also be touched on. The real life of an audience, however, is most often to be found in the descriptions of those who were part of it or witnessed it from the stage.

When analysing the multitude of memoirs and biographies that have survived from this period, it is important to sound a note of caution. As with all sources, biases must be considered and lapses in memory accounted for. A person writing in a journal will have very different motivations from a biographer who was a close friend of the theatrical personality who is their chosen subject. While this may lead one to question the more precise details that are related, what can be revealed more accurately is a sense of the spirit of these groups of people who came together on any one night to watch a play, for a myriad of reasons and with varying degrees of concentration. This will not be a study that relies heavily on crunching numbers. The data to be examined is more qualitative than quantitative.

Thanks to the work of a large body of historians, a great deal is now known about theatre in the eighteenth-century. Their research has revealed the practicalities of a night at the theatre[8], who was writing plays and what was being performed[9]. There exist numerous biographies of influential figures from the period, discussions of set design, lighting,[10] architecture and the economy of theatres.[11] The audience of the period is largely to be found tucked away in chapters that form part of a broader history of the theatre of the age or in books whose subject's ranges far beyond theatrical issues.[12] Of the three most well known books devoted to this subject, the latest was published in 1971 and the other two date from the 1950s.[13] It seems that investigation of the subject

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[8] C. Beecher Hogan, *The London Stage 1776-1800: A Critical Introduction* (London, 1968) pp.xx-xlii

[9] Ibid., pp.clxvii-clxxv

[10] C. Baugh, 'Scenography and Technology' in J. Moody & D. O'Quinn eds., *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre 1730-1830* (Cambridge, 2007) pp.43-56

[11] S. E. Brown, 'Manufacturing spectacle: The Georgian Playhouse and Urban Trade and Manufacturing', *Theatre Notebook,* Vol. 64, No. 2 (2010) pp.58-81

[12] See for example J. White, ''Down on your Knees': The Stage' in *London in the Eighteenth Century: A Great and Monstrous Thing* (London, 2012) pp.302-313

[13] J. J. Lynch, *Box, Pit and Gallery: Stage and Society in Johnson's London* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1953), H. W. Pedicord, *The Theatrical Public in the Time of Garrick* (New York, 1954) and L. Hughes, *The Drama's Patrons: A Study of the Eighteenth-Century Audience* (Austin, 1971)

has fallen out of fashion. They were all written in America, perhaps reflecting the large body of sources relating to Georgian theatre now held there.[14]

Where the audiences are studied, the general trend seems to be to look at them in isolation within the theatre walls. Beyond looking at who made up the audience, their behaviour rarely seems to be put in a wider context. Two exceptions, are works by Marc Baer, who places the O.P. riots and those who took part within a wider political context, and Gillian Russell, who has examined the role of theatre in the public life of women in the period.[15] As far as has been possible to ascertain, the subject has not been looked at in the wider context of the manners of the age. With this in mind, this study will set out to look afresh at the behaviour of the Georgian theatre audience in relation to an age that saw a rise in ideas of politeness, gentility and sensibility. Lawrence Klein has studied the use of politeness by historians as an "analytical category" that can aid an understanding of various aspects of eighteenth-century social, cultural and political life.[16] He does, however, argue that,

"it has consistently proved easier to chart the discourse of behaviour or to analyse its representation than to assess actual behaviours. There is a lot more to be done in this area by bringing different kinds of evidence into some dialectic with the prescriptive literature".[17]

By comparing contemporary accounts of audience behaviour with a select number of the extensive conduct literature and guides to manners written at the time, an assessment will be made of how much they chimed together. By asking if eighteenth-century ideas of politeness are a helpful 'analytical

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[14] For example the diary of Richard Cross, prompter at Drury Lane, is now in the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington D.C. and the diary of Anna Larpent, wife of the Examiner of Plays, John Larpent, is now held in the Huntingdon Library in California.
[15] Baer, *Theatre and Disorder* and G. Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre in Georgian London* (Cambridge, 2007)
[16] L. Klein, 'Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth-Century', *The Historical Journal,* Vol. 45, No. 4 (2002) p.870
[17] Ibid., p.878

category' for investigating Georgian theatre audiences, this study will explore whether it is possible to work out the rules that governed them.

The study will look at audiences in the metropolis and elsewhere in England. While they may not have enjoyed the same variety of theatrical productions as London audiences, sources reveal that those in other towns were just as engaged. Its scope, however, will not encompass the strolling players, who served more rural areas. They may have performed in purpose-built theatres, but could also find themselves acting in inns, barns and stables.[18] The difference between town and country audiences was deemed to be considerable.

Fig 1. Print illustrating the difference between a town and country audience (Thomas Rowlandson, Pub. 1807)

[18] K. Shevelow, *Charlotte* (London, 2005) p.321 and see Thomas Dibdin's account of performing in a barn in *The Reminiscences of Thomas Dibdin* (London, 1837) Vol. 1, p.74

One actress who had experience of both reported that the difference between them was equal to that between "a Mouse-trap and a Mountain".[19] Another actor felt that "a good song, in a village, is thought more of by the audience than all the acting on the stage".[20] There is a sense in which they were considered less refined, possibly less polite. Such distinctions would be well worth investigating, given more space, when considering how theatre across the country reflected the manners of the eighteenth-century.

Similarly, the audiences of the opera and the circus belong to a lengthier study. Opera grew hugely in popularity throughout the period and became highly fashionable. It attracted a more elite audience than the theatres. The requirement of an elaborate dress code helped to ensure that this was the case.[21] Philip Astley, "the originator of the modern circus", produced spectacles that blended horse-riding, acrobatics and comic interludes.[22] While 'the polite'[23] certainly partook in both these diversions, to join them with theatre audiences without the space to explore what also made them different is not possible here.

It is necessary at this stage to define some of the terms that will be used hereafter. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines politeness, as in use in the eighteenth-century, as "intellectual refinement: polish, elegance and good taste"[24], a use now obsolete. More recognisably to modern users, it is "courtesy, good manners, behaviour that is respectful and considerate of others".[25] Manners are "the prevailing modes of life, the conditions of society; the

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[19] Charlotte Charke quoted in Shevelow, *Charlotte,* p.321
[20] Dibdin, *Reminiscences,* Vol. 1, p.81
[21] White, *London,* p.303-305
[22] M. Goff, 'New Entertainment Genres', *Georgians Revealed,* p.114
[23] Lawrence Klein points out that 'polite society' was not a common term in the eighteenth-century and thus 'the polite' is more meaningful. See Klein, 'Politeness and the Interpretation', p.896
[24] 'Politeness',*The Oxford English Dictionary,* http://0-www.oed.com.catalogue.ulrls.lon.ac.uk/view/Entry/146882?redirectedFrom=politeness#eid [last accessed 28th Oct 2014]
[25] Ibid.

customary rules of behaviour in a particular society, period, etc."[26] and, "a person's social behaviour or habits, judged according to the degree of politeness or the degree of conformity to accepted standards of behaviour or propriety".[27] Clearly, there is an overlap between politeness and manners and one can be seen to inform the other. Manners had another meaning, again now obsolete, which was "conduct in its moral aspect; morality; the moral code of a society".[28]

[26] 'Manners',*The Oxford English Dictionary,* http://0-www.oed.com.catalogue.ulrls.lon.ac.uk/view/Entry/113569?rskey=30O7HW&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid [last accessed 28th Oct 2014]
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

1. Eighteenth-Century Manners

The period under consideration fits neatly into the middle of the Georgian era that spanned the years 1714 to 1830. In the popular imagination, Britain under the four Georges has often been viewed as a time of licentiousness and coarseness.[29] Fashion led the way with little regard to propriety. In England, towns and cities grew rapidly as did fear over the moral implications of urban living.[30] At the start of the eighteenth-century there were seven towns with a population of over 10,000; by the end of it there were almost fifty.[31] It has been defined as a commercial era of consumption where "a history of luxury and attitudes to luxury would come very close to being a history of the eighteenth century".[32] It is an age to which many labels have been attached. "The Age of Modernity" describes the move "towards a more industrial, commercial and urban society with greater political engagement by ordinary people, greater religious freedom and the development of the nation state".[33] "The Age of Reason" refers to the ideas of the Enlightenment, an extension of concepts of modernity that rejected ideas based on tradition and promoted scepticism, reason and science.[34]

Another well-known epithet of the Georgian era is the "Age of Politeness". Paul Langford associates views of politeness with a growing middle-class. "Politeness conveyed upper-class gentility, enlightenment, and sociability to a much wider elite whose only qualification was money, but who were glad to spend it on acquiring the status of a gentleman".[35] Amanda Vickery prefers to steer clear of the term middle-class, finding it fraught with problems of distinction, instead preferring to use 'the polite' or 'the genteel' to define a

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[29] A. Goodrich, 'Introduction' in *Georgians Revealed*, p.8
[30] P. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783* (Oxford, 1989) p.389
[31] Ibid., p.418
[32] Ibid., p.3
[33] Goodrich, 'Introduction', p.8
[34] 'Enlightenment', *Oxford English Dictionary,* http://0-www.oed.com.catalogue.ulrls.lon.ac.uk/view/Entry/62448?redirectedFrom=enlightenment#eid [last accessed 30th Oct 2014]
[35] Langford, *Polite and Commercial,* p.4

group that encompassed "lesser landed gentlemen, attornies, doctors, clerics, merchants and manufacturers".[36] She adopts these terms because this is how these people described themselves, demonstrating in what high esteem concepts of politeness and gentility were held. Langford summarises that, "the language of politeness had enormous power in its day" and in the eighteenth-century had an "emphasis on avoiding constraint and ceremony, in favour of ease and informality, even in arcane rituals of daily intercourse".[37]

Politeness in the eighteenth-century may have been assuming a more informal aspect, but there were numerous writers who set out to elucidate the rules of society in conduct manuals and advice books.[38] These were often aimed in particular at young men and women to provide a guide to moral and proper behaviour. Their scope was wide, and could range from instructing a lady in the art of conversation to reminding a gentleman of the importance of skilful carving of joints of roast meat.[39] Seemingly, all areas of life were to be guided by sets of rules that would ensure a safe passage through polite society, and avoid the pitfalls that could lead to anything from embarrassment to utter ruin. Fear of such consequences is palpable in some, as here in *Essays addressed to Young Married Women* from 1782:

"though Virtue and Vice may have travelled progressively upon the same scale since the Creation to this day, the influence of Folly, and her inseparable companions Vanity and Dissapation (sic), have, within the present century, been extended in Britain to a degree not only unknown to, but inconceivable by our Ancestors".[40]

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[36] A. Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (London, 1999) pp.13-14
[37] Langford, 'Eighteenth-Century Politeness', p.315
[38] A good selection are to be found in J. E. Mason, *Gentlefolk in the Making* (Philadelphia, 1935) pp.175-219
[39] Unknown, *The Female Instructor; or Young Woman's Companion* (Liverpool, 1811) p.114 and P. Stanhope, Lord Chesterfield, *Lord Chesterfield's Advice to his Son on Men and Manners* (London, 1787) p.49
[40] E. Griffiths, *Essays Addressed to Young Married Women* (London, 1782) p.iii

The Female Instructor from 1811 is even more explicit about the dangers to young women of neglecting a robust education. It warns that "where this has been neglected, or the method of conducting it mistaken, it has plunged them into vice, and they have felt at length its direful and unavoidable effects".[41] For women in particular, where a good marriage was the best, if not only, option for a successful life, the importance of walking a path of propriety could not be overstated.[42]

One of the subjects often mentioned in these manuals is the employment of time. Generally, for women, this revolved around domestic amusements. Suitable occupiers of time were the reading of improving books (most novels, the popularity of which blossomed in this period, were not included in this category[43]), painting and drawing, needlework and music.[44] Leisure pursuits beyond the home were regarded with suspicion in some quarters and caution was urged.

"Let her not be abandoned in her outset in life to the giddiness and mistaken kindness of fashionable acquaintance in the metropolis; nor forwarded under their convoy to public places; there to be whirled, far from maternal care and admonition, in the circles of levity and folly, into which…she ought not to have been permitted to step."[45]

Such warnings aside, however, the fact remained that inevitably the outside world must be negotiated if a marriage was to be made.[46] Fortunately for the Georgians, this period saw a huge expansion in leisure activities in which

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[41] Unknown, *The Female Instructor,* p.9
[42] Langford, *Polite and Commercial,* pp.112-113
[43] Ibid., pp.95-96. See also *The Female Instructor* which includes a scathing attack on the reading of novels, p.174
[44] Griffiths, *Essays Addressed,* pp.62-67
[45] Unknown, *The Female Instructor,* p.166
[46] Langford, *Polite and Commercial,* p.115

women were active participants.[47] There were pleasure gardens, assemblies, lectures, debating clubs, circuses, opera and, of course, the theatre.[48]

[47] Vickery, *Gentleman's Daughter,* p.225-226
[48] Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre,* p.1

2. Eighteenth-Century Theatre

Using some of the extensive body of work already mentioned, the following chapter will study the background to eighteenth-century theatre and explore some of the key events that shaped it. By alluding to the secondary literature that exists, it will further highlight subject areas that scholars have explored. Such works will form a backdrop to the subsequent study of audience behaviour.

The Georgian period has been described as "the Golden Age of British Theatre…the age of truly popular theatre."[49] Just a few years earlier, however, things had not looked so rosy. Between 1642 and 1660, theatres were closed by the Puritans in the hope of exterminating the vice and immorality that were associated with them. When they reopened, Charles II issued two Royal patents to Sir William Davenant and Thomas Killigrew, both loyal supporters of the new king.[50] This gave the two men the power to build theatres in London and perform theatrical entertainments. Crucially, the patents prevented anyone else from doing the same. This created a duopoly in London that existed until "the legal restriction on the right to perform was finally, at overlong last, abolished by the act of 1843".[51]

Despite this, and due to some rather lax enforcement of the patent laws -which meant theatres were in essence free from censorship- theatre continued to diversify and to grow in popularity throughout the early eighteenth-century.[52] The Little Theatre in the Haymarket opened in 1720 and the Goodman's Field Theatre in 1729.[53] This lack of control over theatrical establishments, including Lincoln's Inn Field, run by John Rich, presented a problem to authority figures,

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[49] I. Mackintosh, *The Georgian Playhouse: Actors, Audiences and Architecture 1730-1830* (London, 1975), Introduction
[50] R. D. Hume, 'Theatre as Property in Eighteenth-Century London', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies,* Vol. 31, No. 1 (2008), pp.17-18
[51] Ibid., p.41
[52] For a detailed analysis of the workings of the patents throughout the eighteenth-century see Hume, 'Theatre as Property', pp17-46
[53] Ibid., p.23

especially when they saw them selves satirised in plays such as John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera.* In 1737, Robert Walpole successfully drove through the famous licensing act.[54] Two new posts were created to fulfil its obligations, the Examiner and Deputy-Examiner of Plays.[55]

In 1732, John Rich built Covent Garden Theatre for his company, close to the already established Drury Lane Theatre.[56] When it opened on the 7th December,[57] it signalled the start of an era dominated by these two theatrical powerhouses. Outside London, too, theatre was expanding and developing. So much so that, "the expansion in theatre going and theatre building of the eighteenth century has never been matched: from one legitimate playhouse, Drury Lane, in 1714 to over 280 places of regular theatrical entertainment throughout Britain in 1805".[58]

Outside the metropolis, towns staged productions in direct contradiction of the 1737 Act, bolstered by their distance from London and the watchful eyes of the authorities that upheld it.[59] Many were keen, however, to enjoy the prestige and security of a Theatre Royal operating under a Royal Patent. Edinburgh was the first to achieve this in 1767, and over the following decade other towns, such as Bath, Norwich and Liverpool, also gained royal approval, though they sometimes had to fight to do so.[60] In some quarters, theatres were not considered to be respectable and their growth was discouraged.[61]

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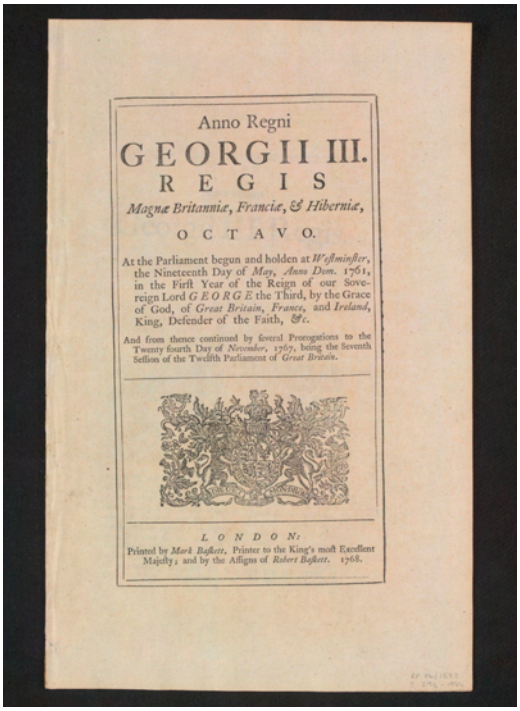
[54] Hughes, *Drama's Patrons,* p.10
[55] L. W. Conolly, 'The Censor's Wife at the Theater: The Diary of Anna Margaretta Larpent, 1790-1800', *Huntingdon Library Quarterly,* Vol. 35, No.1 (1971) p.49
[56] J. Moody & D. O'Quinn, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre 1730-1830* (Cambridge, 2007) p.xviii
[57] E. W. Brayley, *Historical and Descriptive Accounts of the Theatres of London* (London, 1826) p.13
[58] Mackintosh, *The Georgian Playhouse*, Introduction
[59] A. Foy, 'An Eighteenth-Century Capital of Culture? Conflict and Controversy in Liverpool's Pursuit of a Theatre Royal, 1749-1771', *Theatre Notebook,* Vol. 65, No. 1, p.6
[60] Ibid., p.4
[61] ibid., pp.7-8



Anno Regni

GEORGII III.

REGIS

Magnæ Britanniæ, Franciæ, & Hiberniæ,

OCTAVO.

At the Parliament begun and holden at *Westminster*, the Nineteenth Day of *May*, *Anno Dom.* 1761, in the First Year of the Reign of our Sovereign Lord *GEORGE* the Third, by the Grace of God, of *Great Britain*, *France*, and *Ireland*, King, Defender of the Faith, *&c.*

And from thence continued by several Prorogations to the Twenty fourth Day of *November*, 1767, being the Seventh Session of the Twelfth Parliament of *Great Britain*.

LONDON:

Printed by *Mark Baskett*, Printer to the King's most Excellent Majesty; and by the Assigns of *Robert Baskett*. 1768.

Fig 2. Printed Act of Parliament licensing a playhouse in Bath 1768 (production unknown)

Despite the obvious and growing popularity of Georgian theatre, it is not an era distinguished by great dramatic literature. A few exceptions have survived the test of time, the most obvious being Sheridan and Goldsmith. Christopher Baugh contends that, despite this, "theatre throughout Europe was a hugely popular form that responded fully and widely to social and political events". The paucity of plays now considered first-rate, he feels, means it is "important to treat with caution modern judgments about what is great dramatic literature and to inflect the assumption that 'great plays' are a necessary ingredient of great theatre".[62]

Hume has argued that the lack of innovation shown by many playwrights during this period can be attributed directly to the royal patents set up in the 1660s and reinforced by the Licensing Act of 1737. "Duopolist companies do not need to stage a lot of new plays and are highly unlikely to take risks or to be experimental and adventurous when they do mount one. John Rich almost stopped staging new mainpieces in the first thirteen seasons after the

[62] C. Baugh, 'Baroque to Romantic Theatre', *Theatre History,* p.33

Licensing Act- and one of the few he mounted was a vehicle for David Garrick".[63]

It is also worth bearing in mind that the repertory nature of theatre at the time also encouraged a tendency to repeat previously performed plays. Theatres generally aimed to provide a different play on each of the six performance nights a week. If a play proved popular, it could enjoy a more extended run.[64] Managers had to stage shows that their actors were familiar with in order to meet this aim. Audiences, too, were often happy to watch a play a number of times and prided themselves on their familiarity with the material, and their ability to spot when actors changed a piece of stage business or missed a line.[65]

There is evidence to suggest that performers –and not plays- were often the reason people went to the theatre. Whether this was because of the lack of innovative plays as a result of patents and censorship, as Hume argues, or whether this trend developed naturally, and could instead be considered another reason for this lack of original drama, is hard to tease out. Hume has, however, found figures that support the idea that a star name could be a serious draw for audiences. In the 1742-1743 season, David Garrick appeared at Drury Lane. "The company grossed £117 per night on average from the seventy-eight non-benefit performances involving Garrick (some of them in minor roles), but only £55 per night from the fifty-nine nights Garrick did not perform".[66]

At the start of the period, tastes inclined towards the classical, but by the early nineteenth-century, romanticism had taken over.[67] The bawdy comedies of the Restoration were considered too crude by the mid-1700s and were often revised to make them more suitable, if they were performed at all.[68] Even

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[63] Hume, 'Theatre as Property', p.37
[64] Hogan, *The London Stage,* p.xx
[65] C. Price, *Theatre in the Age of Garrick* (Oxford, 1973) p.5
[66] Hume, 'Theatre as Property', p.28
[67] Baugh, 'Baroque to Romantic', pp.42-48
[68] Hughes, *Drama's Patrons,* p.122-124

Shakespeare did not escape such treatment, and the endings to his plays were often changed to suit current taste. Although not the only one to alter the bard, Garrick is, perhaps, the most well known. In his time, he made alterations to *Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet* and *The Winter's Tale* among others.[69] These adaptations were not always successful –even at the time –but are now widely derided.[70]

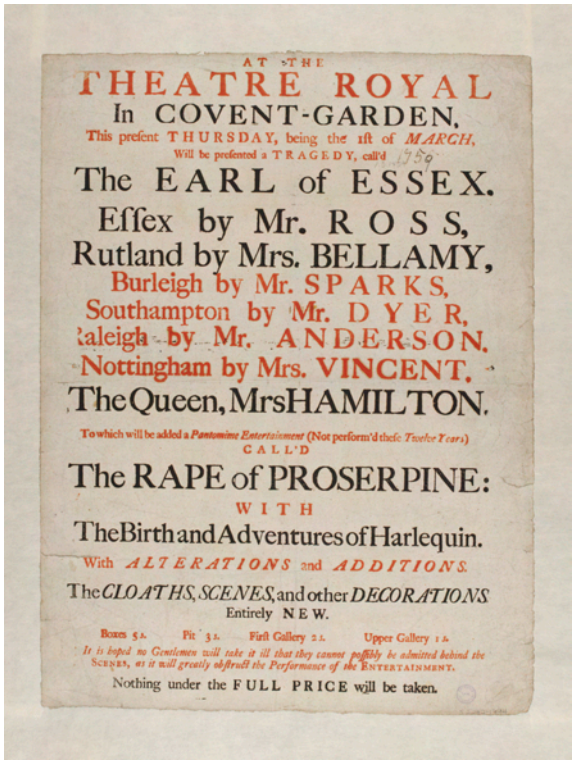
As the eighteenth-century progressed, there was a growing call for mixed entertainment that incorporated drama, music and, increasingly, spectacle.[71] This trend went hand-in-hand with an increase in the size of the theatres themselves. Ever more elaborate scenery, costumes and processions required a larger backdrop. By the 1790s, the two London patent theatres could seat over 3,000 people[72], hardly conducive to intimate drama. The stage and the auditorium were becoming more separate. This was a continuation of the process that had seen Garrick abolish the practice of audience members sitting on the stage in 1760[73] and introduce footlights later on in that decade,[74] as a literal barrier between the two spaces.

[69] Price, *Garrick,* p.146-151
[70] Langford, *Polite and Commercial,* p.308
[71] Hughes, *Drama's Patrons,* p.101-102
[72] J. Davis, 'Spectatorship' in *The Cambridge Companion,* p. 57
[73] Ibid., p.58
[74] Hogan, *The London Stage,* p.lxv

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
Illustrating the scale of Drury Lane Theatre by 1804 (I. Taylor)

The actual business of going to the theatre was a much less controlled experience than a 21st century audience would be used to. Nevertheless it followed what would have been a recognised pattern. The evening's play would be announced on the previous evening's playbill. On the day of the performance the relevant information could also be found in a number of the daily newspapers or on the 'big bills'. These were larger reproductions of the playbills that would be available at the theatre that evening and were pasted in prominent places to be viewed by passersby. It wasn't until the end of the century that show information was known further in advance, although still no more than a week's notice. This was of minor importance because there was no booking system at the theatres, unless, of course, you were lucky enough to be able to afford a box. These were the only seats in the house that could be booked in advance. The start times of plays grew steadily later throughout the

period. Certainly, by 1817, the shows at the two London patent theatres began at seven o'clock in the evening.[75]



AT THE
THEATRE ROYAL
In COVENT-GARDEN.
This preſent THURSDAY, being the 1ſt of MARCH,
Will be preſented a TRAGEDY, call'd
The EARL of ESSEX.
Eſſex by Mr. ROSS,
Rutland by Mrs. BELLAMY,
Burleigh by Mr. SPARKS,
Southampton by Mr. DYER,
Raleigh by Mr. ANDERSON.
Nottingham by Mrs. VINCENT.
The Queen, Mrs HAMILTON.
To which will be added a Pantomime Entertainment (Not perform'd theſe Twelve Years)
CALL'D
The RAPE of PROSERPINE:
WITH
The Birth and Adventures of Harlequin.
With ALTERATIONS and ADDITIONS.
The CLOATHS, SCENES, and other DECORATIONS
Entirely NEW.
Boxes 5s. Pit 3s. First Gallery 2s. Upper Gallery 1s.
It is hoped no Gentlemen will take it ill that they cannot poſſibly be admitted behind the Scenes, as it will greatly obſtruct the Performance of the ENTERTAINMENT.
Nothing under the FULL PRICE will be taken.

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
A playbill from 1759 (unknown artist)

The outer or street doors of the theatre were opened first, admitting the audience to the lobbies and hallways that led to the auditorium. The doors directly into the house, however, would remain closed until around an hour before the show was due to begin. By the times the doors did open the crowds were usually large. It was unwise to arrive late because the seats were unreserved and the best ones would inevitably go first. Door keepers on each of the interior doors would sell tickets from those spots once they had opened. This system meant that the opening of the house could be chaotic and confusing.[76]

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[75] Rev. J. Genest, *Some Account of the English Stage from the Restoration in 1660 to 1830* (Bath, 1832), Vol. VIII, p.651

[76] The details of the practicalities of a night at the theatre are taken from C. Beecher Hogan, *The London Stage 1776-1800: A Critical Introduction* (London, 1968) pp.xx-xxvii

With little consideration of health and safety, the auditorium could be packed dangerously full, and there are examples of people being injured or even crushed to death once the doors were opened.[77] Once inside, the house was divided into boxes, pit and gallery. The most exclusive seats, in the boxes, were occupied by the wealthiest patrons and members of the *beau monde*. The pit was the home of the intelligentsia, professionals and critics and the galleries were full of tradesmen, apprentices, footmen, sailors and servants.[78] Amongst the audience would move the fruit women, selling refreshments, copies of plays and books of songs, and the prostitutes who worked in the auditorium.[79]

A fruit woman at work (unknown artist, 19th-century)

[77] A number of people were killed at the Little Theatre in Haymarket in 1794. See M. Kelly, *Reminiscences of Michael Kelly* (London, 1826) Vol. 2, p.56
[78] Davis, 'Spectatorship', p.57
[79] Hughes, *Drama's Patrons,* p.164-169

3. Contemporary Views of the Theatre

Despite its increasing popularity, in an age of politeness, the moral value of the theatre was repeatedly called into question. In 1698, Jeremy Collier published his vitriolic *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage.* He introduced his argument with the words,

"Being convinced that nothing has gone further in Debauching the Age than the Stage Poets, and Play-House, I thought I could not employ my time better than in writing against them".[80]

The passing of the Licensing Act in 1737 was seen as a response to the increasingly immoral tone of the plays on offer, although Walpole's dislike of the stage's ability to satirise authority figures was also a factor.[81] James Baine's call-to-arms in 1770 urged his readers to forgo the theatre and to engage in activity that would "inspire others with the same abhorrence of it".[82] In his view, "the STAGE is an institution immoral, and inconsistent with the purity of the Christian profession. It is against a general corruption of manners, and a late flagrant prostitution of the STAGE in particular, that the author remonstrates".[83]

Writing to *The Times* in 1809 on the subject of the O.P. riots, an unnamed author argued, reflecting the wishes of the rioters, that the number of private boxes should be reduced and the tickets returned to their former price. Unlike many of the rioters, who argued this out of a desire to see the theatre continue to be accessible to many walks of life, this writer argued that privates boxes, and especially the small rooms adjoining them, encouraged improper behaviour and that consequently all areas of the theatre should be open and

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[80] J. Collier, *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (London, 1698) p.1
[81] Langford, *Polite and Commercial,* pp.48-49
[82] J. Baines, *The Theatre Licentious and Perverted or, a Sermon for the Reformation of Manners* (Edinburgh, 1771) p.39
[83] Ibid., p.viii

visible. As for prices, they should be lowered because actors were paid too handsomely and out of all proportion to what they deserved. If their wages were lowered, then so could the price of admission and managers could still expect to turn a reasonable profit. He believed that plays should always be "*chaste* and *instructive"* and confessed that, "the Theatre, the Players, and the Representations are not, at this time, what they ought to be".[84]

With regards to the conduct manuals, theatre certainly does not appear on the list of recommended ways to usefully employ one's time. Where it is mentioned, it is more likely to be a cause for concern. In *The Female Instructor,* metaphors involving the stage are used to warn against undesirable behaviour. The writer urged, "teach her that the world is not a stage for the display of superficial, or even of shining talents, but for the strict and sober exercise of fortitude, temperance, meekness, faith, diligence, and self-denial".[85] And later, "conversation must not be considered as a stage for the display of our talents; so much as a field for the exercise and improvement of our virtues".[86] The stage was clearly allied with a vulgarity and brashness unbecoming in a young woman, and the opposite of the desirable virtues listed.

More explicitly, the hazards of theatregoing were used to illustrate why children needed a firm and sober parental influence. The contrasting parenting styles of Antigone and Phronissa were used as demonstration. While Antigone allowed her children a great deal of freedom, Phronissa (readers would have been aware that Phronesis is a Greek word meaning wisdom[87]) was careful to shield her children from harmful influence. Antigone led her daughters "or sent them to the playhouse twice or thrice a week, where a great part of their natural modesty is worn off and forgotten: modesty, the guard of youthful

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[84] Unknown, *Four Letters on the Theatre; Written During the Dispute between the Public and the Proprietors of the New Theatre Royal, In Covent Garden, on its Opening in 1809* (London, 1809) pp.29-30
[85] Unknown, *The Female Instructor,* p.106
[86] Unknown, *The Female Instructor,* p.115
[87] 'phronesis', *Oxford English Dictionary, http://0-www.oed.com.catalogue.ulrls.lon.ac.uk/view/Entry/142985?redirectedFrom=phronesis#eid* [last accessed 27th Oct 2014]

virtue!"[88] Meanwhile, Phronissa took a different approach. "As for plays and romances, they were ever bred up in a just apprehension of the danger and mischief of them: Collier's view of the stage was early put into their closets, that they might learn there the hideous immorality and profaneness of the English comedies".[89] Perhaps somewhat predictably, Antigone's daughters find themselves married and mothers before the age of sixteen, completely unprepared for domestic life and destined to "make haste to ruin and misery".[90] The implications were clear; no respectable young woman should wish to visit a theatre and terrible consequences would wait if she did.

The author of the *Principles of Politeness*, was not quite so damning of the theatre but did admit that "many of our comedies are improper for a young lady to be seen at".[91] His advice was to "never go to a play, that is the least offensive to delicacy…When you go to the Theatre, then, let it be to a tragedy, whose exalted sentiments will ennoble your heart, and whose affecting scenes will soften it".[92]

And it was not just women who were warned of the dangers of the theatre. *The Gentleman Instructed* by William Darrell was originally published in 1704 but by 1755 was on its twelfth edition revealing it to be "an important and influential eighteenth-century work on conduct".[93] Darrell was unequivocal in his condemnation of a theatre that he believed to be "the Seat of Lewdness, the Nursery of Debauchery…I am of Opinion that a Christian cannot with a safer Conscience enter into the Playhouse, than into a Brothel".[94] That such views were contained in an oft re-printed book shows how widely they were disseminated.

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[88] Ibid., p.108
[89] Ibid., p.109
[90] Ibid., p.109
[91] Rev. J. Trusler, *Principles of Politeness, and of Knowing the World* (London, 1775) Part II, p.12
[92] p.13
[93] Mason, *Gentlefolk,* p.183
[94] W. Darrell, *The Gentleman Instructed in the Conduct of a Virtuous and Happy Life* (London, 1755) p.87

The fact remains, however, that despite these dire warnings, theatre was popular and attended by all manner of people. Polite society chose not to shun it and indeed many figures of eighteenth-century society patronised it; Samuel Johnson, James Boswell, Charles Lamb and Fanny Burney, to name but a few. In response to the anti-theatre polemic frequently voiced, there were those who argued for the reforming powers of theatre. The author of the 1809 letters to *The Times* was one such example. While bemoaning the current state of theatres, he was clear that "a Theatre (under proper regulations), and players and plays (under proper controul (sic) and inspection) may be very conducive to virtue and morality".[95] In this view, he was not alone.[96]

One man who needed no persuading of the stage's virtues was the essayist William Hazlitt. For him, it was fine just as it was. "Wherever there is a play-house, the world will not go on amiss. The stage not only refines the manners, but it is the best teacher of morals, for it is the truest and most intelligible picture of life."[97] Indeed, Hazlitt was keen to distance himself from would-be theatre reformers.

"To shew (sic) how little we agree with the common declamations against the immoral tendency of the stage…we will hazard a conjecture, that the acting of the Beggar's Opera a certain number of nights every year since it was first brought out, has done more towards putting down the practice of highway robbery, than all the gibbets that ever were erected. A person, after seeing this piece, is too deeply imbued with a sense of humanity, is in too good humour with himself and the rest of the world, to set about cutting throats or rifling pockets".[98]

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[95] Unknown, *Four Letters on the Theatre,* p.24
[96] See also: W. Haliburton, *Effects of the Stage on the Manners of a People: and the Propriety of encouraging and establishing A Virtuous Theatre* (Boston, 1792) pp.10-12
[97] W. Hazlitt, ed. G. Sampson, *Selected Essays* (Cambridge, 1950) p.72
[98] Hazlitt, *Selected Essays,* p.73

For some at least, there was no disparity between theatre and polite society.

4. Unacceptable Behaviour

Most of the invectives against theatre were directed at the immorality of what was occurring on stage, and how this might affect the manners and behaviour of people once they left the theatre. The author of the letters to *The Times* provides an exception, with his focus on the indiscreet behaviour in the boxes. In general, however, the behaviour of the audience within the playhouse walls is rarely listed as a reason not to attend them.

Yet the behaviour of audience members could be distinctly rowdy and even criminal. Old Bailey Online reveals that a criminal underclass frequented theatres on a regular basis. Pick-pocketing was the crime of popular choice. On the 13th January 1738, John Birt was found guilty of highway robbery and sentenced to death. During the hearing of the case, it emerged that he had been making a living as a pick-pocket at Drury Lane Theatre for the past two years.[99] Birt is just one in a long list of people convicted for theatre pick-pocketing between 1737 and 1810. The crowded auditorium and passages around it provided the perfect environment for such sleights of hand.

In her diary, Fanny Burney noted of a visit to Covent Garden Theatre on November 18th 1789, "when we arrived at the playhouse we found the lobbies and all the avenues so crowded, that it was with the utmost difficulty we forced our way up the stairs".[100] With so many bodies in close proximity, the job of a pick-pocket was made much easier. It is worth bearing in mind that the Old Bailey records only represent the cases where an arrest was made. Presumably more adept workers evaded detection.

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[99] Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, 31 October 2014), January 1738, trial of John Birt (t17380113-12).
[100] F. Burney, *Diary and Letters of Madame D'arblay (1778-1840)* (London, 1905) Vol.4, p.334

A crowded pit door entrance where pick-pockets might be at work, 1784 (C. Bowles, after Dighton)

There were also criminals with more outrageous plans operating within the playhouse walls. On the 8th November 1738, Henry Fuellin was executed at Tyburn. His family were people of credit and reputation, but Henry was led astray after falling in with the wrong crowd. Amidst a host of robberies committed, the orderly's account relates one carried out at a playhouse. In an effort to turn his back on the increasingly violent mode of robbery in which he was involved, Fuellin decided to "get money in a genteeler Manner" by "Chiving the Frow, i.e. cutting off Women's Pockets, Girdles &c."[101] To this end, he dressed up as a gentleman and, with a companion dressed as his servant, made his appearance at the playhouse and other public places. One evening he set his sights on one particular woman and sat next to her in the pit. He persuaded her to accompany him to a tavern after the play and under the guise of changing

[101] Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, 31 October 2014), Ordinary of Newgate's Account, November 1738 (OA17381108).

some coins with her, robbed her of a three pound, twelve shilling piece, leaving only a few shillings in its place.[102]

A few years later on 18th March 1741, Mary Young met the same fate. More commonly known as Jenny Divers, by the time of her death she had been immortalised as the character of the same name in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera.*[103] She had started her criminal life as a pickpocket at the theatres while still a teenager but soon graduated to more elaborate crimes. Masquerading at the theatre as a lady of quality, she attracted the attentions of a young gentleman from York. After the play, he asked to escort her back to her lodgings. She declined but, acting the part of a married lady, informed him that they could meet when her husband was out of town. When the time for their intended assignation arrived, they were "interrupted" by a gang member pretending to be the returning husband. Their tryst was cut short, but not before Jenny had relieved the gentleman of a very expensive ring.[104]

In the case of Fuellin and Jenny Divers, not only are the conventions of good conduct broken, but they are subverted entirely. Masquerading under the cover of politeness allowed this pair to carry out their crimes. Although not charged with a criminal offence, the behaviour of another gentleman was condemned in the pages of the *Royal Magazine or Quarterly Bee* in 1750. The story was told of the virtuous Eugenia who "drew the attention of one of those fashionable men of *honour,* who call the basest of actions by the name of *gallantry".* Unable to seduce her due to her natural goodness, he determined to take her to the theatre "to those plays which he knew had a natural tendency to soften and unguard the heart". His plan succeeded and having achieved what

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[102] Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, 31 October 2014), Ordinary of Newgate's Account, November 1738 (OA17381108).

[103] P. Rawlings, 'Young, Mary (*c.*1704–1741)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 <http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.catalogue.ulrls.lon.ac.uk/view/article/38738> [last accessed 24 Oct 2014]

[104] Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, 31 October 2014), Ordinary of Newgate's Account, March 1741 (OA17410318).

he so desired he abandoned Eugenia to "misery and ruin".[105] Whether the story is based on fact or fiction is unclear but the moral certainly isn't. Here again this gentleman is manipulating the rules of polite society for his own gain, and again he chooses to do so within the playhouse walls.

Audience behaviour may not have been cited as often as the indecency of plays as a reason to boycott the theatre but, based on these examples, Collier and the writer of *The Female Instructor* may have done well to look to the other side of the footlights to strengthen their arguments. Taking into account the actions of countless pickpockets and unscrupulous young men, not to mention the presence of the prostitutes, it could have been argued that the theatre operated totally outside the bounds of decency and decorum. Such a view would, however, be simplistic.

While such activities may have occurred in the auditorium, it does not necessarily follow that they were accepted by the audience or society. The young man who was the cause of Eugenia's downfall, while appearing to escape the consequences of his actions, was, nevertheless, reprimanded in print. Mary Young and Henry Fuellin were condemned for their attempts to subvert the natural orders of politeness. Criminals of all class were prosecuted and subjected to harsh punishment, including transportation.

Constables were employed to prevent such activity, and their testimonies feature among the Old Bailey records. Two grenadiers took up position on either side of the stage at the start of a performance and were there to act as a deterrent and to step in if the behaviour of the audience should become unruly. They were a familiar sight throughout much of the eighteenth-century;[106] another, highly visible, sign that action would be taken against unsuitable behaviour. In terms of politeness, the presence of these men was ambiguous.

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[105] Reproduced in Haliburton, *Effects of the Stage,* pp.52-53
[106] A. Nicoll, *The Garrick Stage: Theatres and Audience in the Eighteenth-Century* (Manchester, 1980) p.97

The need for their attendance made clear the potential for behaviour that would certainly be deemed impolite.

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
A performance of Macbeth. An armed grenadier can be made out to the right of the stage. (Unknown artist, 1760s)

An example of such potential being realised occurred on December 26th 1801. A "disgraceful riot" broke out during a performance of *Richard III* at the Covent Garden Theatre.[107] A drunken occupant of the two-shilling gallery threw a bottle at an actor and clipped his hat. Most of the audience were outraged and the culprit was arrested. A number of people, however, continued the disturbance, throwing apples and oranges at the stage. The commotion was only stopped when the box-keeper "at the head of a few remaining soldiers, with their bayonets fixed…appeared in the gallery. The glittering steel had a very calming effect upon the mischievous".[108]

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[107] H. Saxe Wydham, *The Annals of Covent Garden Theatre from 1732 to 1897* (London, 1906) Vol. 1, p.286
[108] J. Boaden, *The Memoirs of John Philip Kemble Esq.,* (New York, 1825) Vol. 2, p.308

Elsewhere, evidence exists that the threat of violence was not always needed to check inappropriate behaviour. Fellow audience members and actors were quite prepared to step in and put a stop to it. On 5th September 1787, "goodnatured, unassuming, and honest Michael Kelly"[109] (1762-1826), a singer and composer who worked most extensively at Drury Lane Theatre, was performing in Wakefield in a production of *Love in a Village*. [110] A woman, seated in the stage box, "made such terrible noise, throwing herself into all kinds of attitudes, indulging ever and anon in horrid laughing, that she disconcerted every person who came upon the stage". The final straw for Kelly was a rude remark "loud enough to be heard in the gallery". Kelly stopped the performance and issued a riposte directly to her. The rest of the audience hissed the offending woman. The story had a happy ending, however, because "ever after, when she came to the theatre, (she) conducted herself with becoming decency".[111] Kelly and, by his account, the rest of the audience too, clearly felt that the bounds of decency had been breached and action was taken accordingly.

On behaviour in company, *The Female Instructor* was clear that,

"one of the chief beauties in a female character is that modest reserve, that retiring delicacy, which avoids the public eye…That modesty which is so essential to the sex, will naturally dispose them to be rather silent in company, especially in a large one".

The woman in question was apparently unaware of these natural characteristics of her sex and it fell to Kelly and her fellow audience members to correct her.

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[109] Mrs. Sumbel, *Of the Life of Mrs. Sumbel, Late Wells; Of the Theatres-royal, Drury-lane, Covent-garden, and Haymarket* (London, 1811) Vol. 2, p.239
[110] J. Girdham, 'Kelly, Michael (1762–1826)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2007 http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.catalogue.ulrls.lon.ac.uk/view/article/15303 [last accessed 24 Oct 2014]
[111] M. Kelly, *Reminiscences,* Vol. I, p.305-306

An anecdote from James Boswell's *London Journal* of 1763 provides an example of a self-censoring audience member. On Wednesday 19th January, Boswell, with two friends, Dempster and Erskine, had resolved to watch *Elvira* on its opening night and "as the play would probably be bad, and as Mr. David Malloch, the author, who has changed his name to David Mallet, Esq., [such anglicizing of a name was a definite black mark in Boswell's eyes against a fellow Scot[112]] was an arrant puppy, we determined to exert ourselves in damning it". They arrived at the theatre with oaken cudgels and catcalls in their pockets, determined, clearly, to disrupt the play. The rest of the audience did not join them in their plan, and the trio was forced to leave off. "As we knew it would be needless to oppose that furious many-headed monster, the multitude, as it has been very well painted, we were obliged to lay aside our laudable undertaking in the cause of genius and the cause of modesty".[113]

There is no sense that Boswell considered his plans to disrupt the play unreasonable or dishonourable. He looked forward to the event with relish and was disappointed when it failed. Neither is there the suggestion that, if they had carried out their plan, it would have met with opposition from the constables on duty at the theatre. There is no indication of a fear of repercussions on that front. Just the year before, Boswell, a reluctant student of law, had passed his trials in civil law.[114] That a man of the law would indulge in such activity suggests a certain level of acceptance. The sole motivation for abandoning their scheme seems to have been the lack of support from the rest of the audience, and an awareness of the opposition they would face if they proceeded. The audience here was working as a self-regulating entity where there was a certain safety in numbers. This was also the case in the Kelly incident. Presumably, if a large portion of the audience had agreed with the woman's remarks then he would not have subdued her so easily.

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[112] F. Pottle, eds. notes to *Boswell's London Journal 1762-1763* (London, 1950) pp.152-153
[113] J. Boswell (F. Pottle eds.), *Boswell's London Journal 1762-1763* (London, 1950) pp.152-153
[114] F. A. Pottle, 'Introduction' in *Boswell's London Journal*, p.10

On a lighter note, disruptive audience members did not always behave with such malice aforethought. The actor and playwright Thomas Dibdin (1771-1841), whose career began as an apprentice upholsterer before he found his vocation as a travelling actor and writer with a strong association to Covent Garden Theatre,[115] recalls how an actor by the name of Newton, "an extraordinarily pompous actor, but thoroughly good-natured", was forced to stop mid-performance in Tunbridge Wells. The cause of his displeasure was a crying infant in the pit.

""Madam, I assure you, upon the veracity of a man and a *gentle*-man, that unless you instantly adopt some method of keeping the play quiet, it will be morally impossible for the child to proceed." The mistake set the house in a roar of laughter, which frightened the unhappy infant into a scream "so loud and dread", that the disappointed mother was of necessity obliged to retire with her offspring, and resign the expected pleasure of the evening".[116]

The woman was given her money back and the manager of the company, the formidable Mrs Baker, chastised her with the words, "Foolish woman! Foolish woman! Don't come another night till half-price, and then give the poor baby some Dalby's Carminative".[117] Evidently, bringing your very young child to the theatre was not the issue in this case. In their writing, Charles Lamb and the patent theatre actress and mimic Mrs Sumbel (1762-1829).[118] suggest that children were often in audiences.[119] In this instance, it was the crying that caused the problems. Newton quite deliberately described himself as a

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[115] J. R. Stephens, 'Dibdin, Thomas John (1771–1841)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2013 http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.catalogue.ulrls.lon.ac.uk/view/article/7589 [last accessed 24 Oct 2014]

[116] Dibdin, *Reminiscences,* Vol. 1, pp.225-226

[117] Ibid., Vol. 1, pp.225-226

[118] K. A. Crouch, 'Wells , Mary Stephens (1762–1829)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.catalogue.ulrls.lon.ac.uk/view/article/29016 [last accessed 24 Oct 2014] and Genest, *Some Account of the English Stage,* Vol. 8, p.109

[119] C. Lamb, *The Essays of Elia* (London, 1906) pp.114-118 and Mrs. Sumbel, *Mrs Sumbel,* Vol. 1, pp.4-5

gentleman, conjuring up all the associations of that word. By calling himself thus, he assumed social superiority and implied that the woman was breaking a moral code in allowing her baby to behave in such a way.

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
A child in the boxes (artist unknown, 18th-19th-century)

5. Acceptable behaviour

If one were to look exclusively at the recollections and views expressed above, then it would appear incontrovertible that the theatre was a hot bed for bad behaviour. While there clearly were limits to what was acceptable, they seem far more flexible than some of the more prescriptive codes of conduct would allow. It is important to remember that most nights at the theatre passed off without any incident worth reporting.[120] This is not to say, however, that the audience behaved in the manner that the author of the Theatre Charter expects of modern audiences In order to investigate this supposition further, the discussion will now turn to the types of behaviour that audiences appear to have considered acceptable.

When audiences approved of what they were watching, they could be warm and generous. The memoirs and biographies of actors and playwrights of the period are littered with references to spontaneous displays of approbation. Mrs Sumbel quotes a review of her theatrical imitations in the *Public Advertiser* that speaks of, 'universal applause', 'continued plaudits', 'involuntary bravos' and a 'heartfelt tear'.[121]

Michael Kelly is similarly rewarded after his rendition of "Haste thee nymph" from *L'allegro.*

"I laughed all through it as I conceived it ought to be sung, and as must have been the intention of the composer: the infection ran; and their Majesties, and the whole audience, as well as the orchestra, were in a roar of laughter; and a signal was given from the royal box to repeat it…I sang it five times in the course of that season by special desire."[122]

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[120] Hogan, *London Stage,* p.cxcv
[121] Sumbel, *Mrs Sumbel,* Vol. 3, pp.7-8
[122] Kelly, *Reminiscences,* Vol. 1, pp.320-321

Such displays were not only gratefully received, but were also an expected part of the evening's entertainment. Rounds of applause would accompany actors' entrances, follow well-known or well-loved speeches or scenes, and often attend their exits. By way of acknowledgment, actors would pause until the applause had died away. As William Sauter explains, "for the audience, mid-scene and end-of-scene applause confirmed that they were attending a marvellous performance and that it had been worth bringing family and friends to such an occasion".[123]

The involvement of the eighteenth-century audience often went beyond merely applauding in the right places. Kelly, while in the audience himself, was moved enough by a "very fine specimen of natural acting" by a Mr. Dowton, to call out to, "a gentleman, with whom I was acquainted, who was sitting within three boxes of our party, -"This is fine acting: this, I'll answer for it, will do." My prognostication, it seems, was so loudly expressed, that, as Dowton afterwards told me, he heard it on the stage."[124] There is no record of any bad feeling being roused in other audience members by this interjection and the anecdote is told with a touch of pride by Kelly, perhaps because his voice had carried so well.

Kelly's attitude is interesting. Elsewhere, he told with disgust how a disruptive woman's comment could be heard in the gallery. With regards to his own behaviour his attitude was markedly different. The content of the remark and not the volume seemed to have been the real issue. The condemnation of other audience members also seemed to have been crucial. In his case, he suffered no backlash. The lady in Wakefield was not so fortunate.

At Plymouth Dock, Mrs Crouch found herself on the receiving end of a piece of audience interaction. While performing in *No Song, No Supper* she sang a ballad that included the line "spare a poor little gipsey a half-penny" At this moment, a man "hallooed from the pit, "That I will, my darling" and threw a Shilling on

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[123] W. Sauter, 'The Audience' in D. Wiles and C. Dymkowski, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre History* (Cambridge, 2013) p.170-171
[124] Kelly, *Reminiscences,* Vol. 2, p.111

the stage. The liberality of honest Jack produced a roar of laughter from the audience".[125] Clearly, an interruption, perceived to be in good spirit by the rest of the audience, was not just accepted but seemed to be encouraged.

Audiences were willing to indulge back-stage jokes. The actor Mr. Lewis played a principal part in a provincial theatre and, accordingly, his name appeared in large letters on the play-bill. A member of the company took offence at this distinction, so Mr. Lewis and the managers conspired to print the following day's bills with Lewis written very small and the name of the offended actor in the largest letters of all. "On the night of the play, the audience, who were in the secret of the hoax, gave this gentleman (who had little more to do than announce others) three distinct rounds of applause at each of his entrances and exits."[126] The chastened actor, as well as the audience, was able to see the funny side of the situation.

This situation demonstrates a high level of engagement from the audience that allowed them to share in the joke. It also shows a friendly irreverence that allowed a shared to joke to take precedence over a studied attention to the action of the play.

Allardyce Nicoll contends,

"we may believe that, with four occasional exceptions, the public listened attentively to what the actors had to say and permitted the action to proceed without interruption. The exceptions may be classed as (a) minor demonstrations by groups of spectators when they felt that their supposed 'rights' were being infringed upon, (b) temporary exhibitions of disapproval directed either at individual performers or new plays, (c) very occasional major upheavals…(d) the confused conditions…associated with the 'benefit' performances".[127]

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[125] Ibid., p.105
[126] Dibdin, *Reminiscences,* Vol. 1 pp.297-298
[127] Nicoll, *The Garrick Stage,* pp.87-88

While these four categories are arguably valid, it is important to avoid putting a modern interpretation on what may have constituted an average night at the theatre. The notion that audiences only interrupted performances when they had reason to complain, is not supported by the evidence mentioned here. Many of the anecdotes are related because of the effect they had on the actor in question, and not necessarily because the audiences behaviour was unusual or particularly noteworthy. It can be presumed that interruptions, shared jokes and general audience interaction were a common feature of a performance.

James Boaden confirms such a suspicion when he writes of the occupants of the galleries:

"Woe, at all events, to the refinement that would wish to "govern their roaring throats." They may sometimes burst in thunder upon a moment of exquisite and tender feeling; and it is then hard to preserve a philosophic temperament. But nothing can to the actor compensate the *cheer* of their honest unrestrained applause."[128]

By his calculation, honesty wins out over refinement of manners.

The inhabitants of the top gallery valued by Boaden for their honesty, 1805 (Pub. By Thomas Tegg)

[128] Boaden, *Memoirs,* Vol. 1, p.117

Mistakes could also be forgiven as Michael Kelly discovered when, during one scene, a skeleton that formed part of the scenery became stuck and refused to sink down under the stage at the given moment. As Kelly explained,

"I who had just been killing Blue Beard, totally forgetting where I was, ran up with my drawn sabre, and pummelled the poor skeleton's head with all my might, vociferating, until he disappeared, loud enough to be heard by the whole house, "D-n you! d-n you! why don't you go down?" The audience were in roars of laughter at this ridiculous scene, but good-naturedly appeared to enter into the feelings of an infuriated composer".[129]

Just how good-natured the laughter was is now impossible to know, but in this anecdote the enjoyment of a spectacle does not appear to be have been wholly dependent on it being executed perfectly.

Going to see a play was clearly an interactive experience. Audience members did not expect to sit passively and refrain from voicing their opinion. In view of this, it may be worthwhile to consider the relationship between audience and actor as a conversation, reflecting the two-sided nature of the relationship between them that has been revealed. It is interesting to note how the audience's engagement in the discussion reflects the rules for polite conversation to be found in the manuals. It has already been noted that women were expected to be demure and speak little. There seems little doubt that hissing loudly and applauding enthusiastically would not have been approved of.

[129] Kelly, *Reminiscences,* Vol. 2, p.132

Audience members laughing and showing a lack of attention, both habits disapproved of by Lord Chesterfield ('A Laughing Audience', William Hogarth, 18th-century)

In Lord Chesterfield's *Advice to his Son*, he is unequivocal in laying down his 'Rules for Conversation'.

"There is nothing so brutally shocking, nor so little forgiven, as a seeming inattention to the person who is speaking to you…Nothing discovers a little, futile, frivolous mind, more than this, and nothing is so offensively ill-bred…Be, therefore, not only really, but seemingly and manifestly attentive to whoever speaks to you."[130]

Considering the lack of attention shown by some members of the audience, their behaviour would be in direct breech of Lord Chesterfield's advice.

On the subject of laughter, he considered that "frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill-manners; it is the manner in which the mob

[130] Stanhope, Lord Chesterfield, *Advice to his Son*, pp.25-26

express their silly joy at silly things; and they call it being merry. In my mind, there is nothing so illiberal, and so ill-bred as audible laughter".[131] No doubt, the 'roars of laughter' at Kelly or the laughter that accompanied the pit occupier's interruption of Mrs. Crouch would have met with his hearty disapproval. He also believed it to be "the height of ill-manners to interrupt any person while speaking, by speaking yourself, or calling off the attention of the company to any new subject. This, however, every child knows".[132] Every child may have known, but theatre audiences often chose to ignore this dictum. No doubt many actors would have agreed with Lord Chesterfield but their audiences carried on regardless.

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
Laughing at comedy (Thomas Rowlandson, Pub. 1789)

[131] Ibid., p.56
[132] Ibid., p.26

6. The Rights of the Audience

While audiences operated within their own codes of conduct, often these were at variance with what constituted polite behaviour in the period. Many complaints were motivated by unacceptable behaviour. Tate Wilkinson (1739-1803), patentee of the Theatre Royal in York[133], among others, after a lifetime of service on the stage, deplored the rudeness he and his fellow actors suffered at the hands of their audiences.

"There surely is nothing so barbarous, so uncivilised, so unlike a real gentleman, as the exercising this inhuman, this torturing, affected disposition…Even the ladies are not always blameless in this respect, but excite their own mirth by the putting their fellow creatures on the rack".[134]

John Genest is clear that "when a man merely because he has paid some few shillings at the door of a playhouse, considers himself as entitled to insult a performer, by wantonly hissing -or to call on him for an apology, where he has not been to blame –whatever his situation in life may be, he is no longer worthy of the appellation of a gentleman".

Thus, behaviour considered acceptable by certain audience members, was not deemed so by other people and their affronts against politeness caused offence. Rather than notions of politeness, therefore, the focus might shift to the entitlements of audiences, and behaviour that they felt they had a right to exhibit.

The rights of the audience was a recurring theme throughout the period. In 1738 Benjamin Victor, who worked in theatres in Dublin and London, was part

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[133] E. Prince, 'Wilkinson, Tate (1739–1803)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 <http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.catalogue.ulrls.lon.ac.uk/view/article/29430> [last accessed 30 Oct 2014]

[134] T. Wilkinson, *Memoirs of his Own Life* (Dublin, 1791) Vol. 2, p.120

of an audience at the Little Theatre, Haymarket, displeased that a troop of French players had been authorised to play there when many English actors were struggling to find work after the passing of the Licensing Act. According to him, they asserted that, "the Audience had a legal right to show their dislike to any Play or Actor…that the Judicature of the Pit had been acknowledged and acquiesced to, Time immemorial; and as the present Set of Actors were to take their Fate from the Public, they were free to receive them as they pleased".[135]

In 1809, suggesting solutions to the O.P. riots to the theatre managers, William Cobbett insisted that any terms of reconciliation should include,

"A declaration from Mr Kemble, in person, on the part of the whole of the managers, that they recognize…an absolute right in the audience or in any of the audience assembled at the theatre, to express, either by signs or noises of any sort, their disapprobation of any person, or of any thing within the theatre".[136]

Arguably the most famous declaration of audience rights came in the summer of 1784 from Lord Mansfield, during the case of Macklin versus Colman being heard in the court of the King's Bench. James Boaden quoted him as saying,

"Every man that is at the play house, has a right to express his approbation or disapprobation INSTANTANEOUSLY, according as he likes either the acting or piece. There is a right due to the theatre – an unalterable right – they MUST HAVE THAT."[137]

However, "there was a wide distinction between expressing the natural sensations of the mind as they arose on what was seen and heard, and executing a preconcerted design", in Macklin's case, "not only to hiss an Actor

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[135] B. Victor, *The History of the Theatres of London and Dublin from the Year 1730 to the Present Time* (London, 1761) Vol. 1, pp.55-56
[136] W. Dunlap, *Memoirs of George Fred. Cooke, Esq. Late of the Theatre Royal Covent Garden.* (London, 1813) Vol. 2, p.97
[137] Boaden, *Memoirs,* p.95

when he was playing a part in which he was universally allowed to be excellent, but also to drive him from the Theatre, and promote his utter ruin."[138]

With such rights so vehemently declared, it is clear how they could override the rules of politeness. Such decrees certainly allowed for a degree of variance in interpretation. Most behaviour, good or ill, could be encompassed by the first two examples. Lord Mansfield attempted to clarify the point by outlawing 'preconcerted design', but there is no evidence that his advice was taken. Certainly Boswell, (an attorney), with his cat-calls and oaken cudgel in 1763, could be accused of such a plan, although he himself saw this as reasonable. The audiences' perceived rights gave them licence to fully engage with a performance. Such involvement ranged from laughter and enthusiastic applause through to interruptions of approval or its opposite, heckling and even riot.

The most obvious examples of the assertion of rights were riots. The most well-known, were those of 1737, 1763 and 1809. The first ensued after Charles Fleetwood, then manager at Drury Lane Theatre, attempted to deny free admission to footmen in the top gallery. John Genest wrote that, "Fleetwood received a letter, in which the footmen claimed admission into the gallery as a matter of right".[139] In the end they were subdued, but a guard of fifty soldiers was necessary to do so.[140]

In 1763, Thaddeus Fitzpatrick incited a riot after Garrick advertised on the 24th of February that he would not accept half price admission at the end of the third act. After several nights of disorder, Garrick was forced to capitulate. Fitzpatrick then turned to Covent Garden Theatre where, after the rioters had destroyed benches and chandeliers and disrupted performances, the managers there were obliged to do the same. Fitzpatrick considered himself to be acting

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[138] C. Macklin, *Case, Mr. Macklin late of Covent-Garden Theatre, against Mess. Clarke, Aldys, Lee, James, and Miles* (Edinburgh, 1775?) pp.12-13
[139] Genest, *Some Account*, Vol. 2, p.499
[140] Ibid., p.499

on behalf of a "public cause" and that seems to have given him the right to act in a violent manner.[141]

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
The Fitzpatrick riots (unknown artist, c. 1763)

The causes of the O.P. riots have been mentioned and are a clear example of audience members defending their perceived rights. James Boaden recalled "the infamously *indecent* conduct of these rioters" and felt compelled to record, "that future times may have no doubt as to the indecency to which I have alluded, they may here be told, that the appearance of any LADY in the circle of private boxes became a signal for every unmanly description of insult".[142] As a friend of Kemble, it is no surprise that Boaden would condemn the rioters, although his choice of words here is significant. By couching their behaviour in the language of decency, he stressed that a code of conduct had been broken. Aside from their violence, and the damage they did to property, their acting in such an ungentlemanly manner was taken to be representative of the type of people that they were.

In the latter two examples, the rioters were triumphant, clearly showing the power of the audience. It may not be coincidence that it was the footmen who

[141] Wyndham, *Annals,* Vol. 1, pp.154-155
[142] Boaden, *Memoirs,* Vol. 2, p.498

failed to secure their privileges in the gallery. While they, like Fitzpatrick, were fighting for their rights within the playhouse, the reason they were being turned out of the gallery was down to their unruly, impolite behaviour.[143] In the violent defence of their rights, they were no different from Fitzpatrick, but it was their lack of decorum at other times that lost them their battle. Leo Hughes argues that, "it would be gratifying to report that the footmen eventually tired of making such utter nuisances of themselves and were tamed into something like genteel behaviour".[144] Such a view, however, conceals the complexities of the rules that governed audiences. In the theatre, the footmen asserted a power that they must have lacked in other areas of their life. Their resistance to being 'tamed' is, thus, understandable.

Even riots were not completely devoid of the trappings of politeness. During the O.P. riots, those involved would often applaud an actor upon their entrance, before continuing with less polite songs and cat-calls, to demonstrate that their disapprobation lay not with individual performers.[145] No personal insult was intended. In other cases, it was not uncommon to send women out of the playhouse before 'setting to work' on the interior of the theatre.[146] Even in the midst of such apparently uncontrolled behaviour, the rules of propriety still operated on some level.

At Drury Lane in 1740, a dancer was advertised on the playbills for three nights in a row but failed to appear. Having ushered out the ladies, a riot commenced, led by a Marquis, which caused a large amount of damage to the theatre interior. The next morning, however, the chastened Marquis paid one hundred pounds to the manager by way of reparation. He earned himself the epithet of the "noble Marquis" from an approving Benjamin Victor who related the tale.[147] By taking the correct steps on realising that he had behaved badly, this rioter was able to redeem himself – at least in the eyes of this author.

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[143] Genest, *Some Account,* Vol. 2, p.499
[144] Hughes, *Drama's Patrons,* p.18
[145] Dunlap, *George Fred. Cooke,* Vol. 2, p.93
[146] See following example and also Genest, *Some Account,* Vol. 5, pp.488-489
[147] Victor, *History,* Vol. 1, pp.42-43

Sometimes, audiences used their 'right' of disapproval to pass moral judgments on performers. On the 8th December 1807, Mrs H. Johnston returned to the stage at Covent Garden, after a two year absence. "A perfect yell of fury burst out on her appearance".[148] As only a small number of dissidents caused this furore, after appealing to the audience, she was allowed to continue. The following month, when she appeared in *The Belle's Stratagem* more people heckled her. She tried to defend herself but, while they allowed the play to continue, the audience would not be silenced "when any point in the dialogue offered an opportunity to her persecutors". The exact details of Mrs Johnston's indiscretions have not survived, but Boaden recalls that there were allegations made against her that met with "very opposite statements by her and her husband". It is most likely she was accused of infidelity.

During the 1779-1780 season at Covent Garden, Mrs Bulkley was greeted by hisses when she entered as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice.* Following the usual custom she came forward and said, "that as an actress she had always done her best to oblige the Public; and as to her private character, she begged to be excused".[149] In this case, the audience's disapproval of her personal conduct had been made clear, it having become public knowledge that she had taken the son of her long-term lover to her bed.[150]

Even Mrs. Siddons was made to feel the heat of a disapproving public. In 1784, complaints began to circulate that she never applauded the work of other actresses, she had "become mercenary to her brethren" and had forgotten her duty to the public who had raised her to her elevated position.[151] In consequence of this, "it was resolved, on her ensuing appearance at Drury Lane, to drive her with insult from the stage, and blight, if not destroy, the laurels she had proudly worn".[152] By the time that day arrived, on the 5th

[148] Boaden, *Memoirs,* Vol. 2, p.445
[149] Genest, *Some Account,* Vol. 6, p.142
[150] Ibid., p.143
[151] Boaden, *Memoirs,* Vol. 1, p.198
[152] Ibid., p.199

October, press attacks on her "had excited universal attention to her private character, or rather her *personal* conduct in the profession".[153] In the event, she was met with indignant catcalls, and only a firm denial of the accusations and her own "inimitable grace" convinced the audience to calm down.[154] Even then she had to suffer "a sharp and angry salutation" on her entrance for several nights after, although this was "immediately overborne by the more polite and judicious part of the audience".[155] The last remark implies that those upholding the insult to Mrs Siddons were 'impolite'.

Each of these three women had broken the code of politeness. They had failed to act in an appropriate fashion and to display the "humility", "obedience", "discretion", "decency" or "modesty" expected of women at this time.[156] While the two commentators agreed that audiences should not concern themselves with the private lives of their actors, suggesting that their interest itself reflected a want of politeness, it seemed that many theatregoers disagreed. Theatre may have been accused of being licentious, but untoward behaviour in its performers would not necessarily be tolerated. The audiences here were acting as a moral force, and their benchmark seems to have been the acknowledged rules of polite society.

It is hard to find similar moral judgements on sexual indiscretion being passed on actors. Mrs Siddon's brother, John Philip Kemble, was forced to issue a public apology in the papers after having made "such violent love to Miss De Camp, who came into his dressing room about theatrical business".[157] Shortly after, on 29th January 1795, he appeared as Norval in *Douglas* at Drury Lane. When the character of Lord Randolph addressed Norval as "the flower of modesty" it "created no small degree of laughter".[158] Kemble was by this stage a married man and yet his behaviour only seemed to merit the knowing

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[153] Ibid., p.205
[154] Ibid., p.211
[155] Ibid., pp.212-213
[156] All virtues mentioned on p.29 of Unknown, *The Female Instructor*
[157] Genest, *Some Account,* Vol. 7, pp.186-187. Miss DeCamp later married Kemble's brother Charles. See Kelly, *Reminiscences,* Vol. 2, p.152
[158] Ibid., p.187

amusement of the audience. One cannot help but notice the difference in reaction to the indiscretions of Mrs Johnston and Mrs Bulkley. Such behaviour had different implications for men and women and illustrates how differently the two sexes might be treated by polite society.

The inconsistencies highlighted by the melding of polite and impolite behaviour and the passing of moral judgment by a body of people who were capable of acting injudiciously themselves, demonstrate the contradictions inherent in much of the behaviour of the audiences at this time. In 1786, Sophie v. La Roche related with approval the conduct of the audience at Covent Garden Theatre on one of their member being taken ill.

"A man on very nearly the furthest seat in the pit called out to an actor in the midst of the play: 'Stop!' The actor was silent: the man said someone was ill, and must be got out. All are quite calm, though naturally everyone turns to look. Finally the man rises and shouts, 'Go on!' and the actors finished their parts…all waited quietly till the sufferer had been removed and the healthy had resumed their seats."[159]

On entering the auditorium earlier in the evening, the scene was much less civilised. She noted "what a rabid curiosity and lust for pleasure can do in a mob; but heaven preserve me from a second such experience, for some cried, 'I am dying,' 'I am suffocating.'"[160]

It is hard to reconcile the two contrasting descriptions of the same group of people but the explanation may lie in La Roche's use of the word 'mob'. Such a term suggests a group of people who lacked individual identity. Anonymity, in this case at least, seems to have given people permission to act in an indecorous fashion.

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[159] S. v. la Roche (translated by Clare Williams), *Sophie in London 1786: Being the Diary of Sophie v. la Roche* (London, 1933) p.219
[160] Ibid., p.218

It was just such irregular and unpredictable behaviour that Bostonian William Haliburton hoped to control when, in 1792, he published *Effects of the Stage on the Manners of a People; and the Propriety of Encouraging and establishing a Virtuous Theatre.* At the time of writing there was no established theatre in Boston, largely, it seems, due to the opposition of the clergy.[161] In agreement with the opposition of moralisers in England, the author believed that the English theatre was licentious.

"The portraits given by the English and French dramatists of the manners of those two kingdoms, represent gallantry, gaming, drinking and profanity, as the most prominent feature of society in towns: fox hunting, horse racing, bribery at elections and rapes of women in the country".[162]

Crucially, however, he did feel that Boston had the opportunity to wipe that slate clean and start afresh. In short, he was keen to encourage a virtuous stage. Its purpose,

"to describe in delicate language in the most finished colouring, and with powerful action, the character and fate of the profligate debauchee, the perjured lover, the devoted gamester, the besotted drunkard, &c. What man could behold the same unmoved? Or leave the scene without solemn vows of amendment?"[163]

He was not the only one to write of the reforming power of the stage, but, more unusually, he did not just focus on the action on stage as the key to this. His ideas include what may be seen as the eighteenth-century equivalent of the theatre charter aforementioned. He believed that the right to loud applause and hissing, dearly held by an English audience, should be abolished and that "all the passions may be expressed by mute or dumb show".[164] The practice of loudly condemning a play was deemed as being disrespectful to managers. If a

[161] Haliburton, *Effects of the Stage,* p.19
[162] Ibid., p.19
[163] Ibid., p.10
[164] Ibid., p.53

play was disapproved of, then the public may question the manager's choice but "without noise and confusion".[165]

Anyone disobeying these maxims would be brought before a magistrate, and their right to attend the theatre taken away. Their name would be posted on the walls of the theatre to ensure that they did not gain admittance. Only by paying a fine, and promising to behave properly in future, would they gain re-admittance.[166] A similar fate awaited anyone caught "striking, fighting or misbehaving".[167] Furthermore, in order to ensure an orderly atmosphere, the same restrictions and penalties should apply in the "several streets, lanes and passages near by, and til the multitude can have departed".[168]

Clearly, such rules were a reaction to the impolite behaviour of English audiences. That Haliburton only thought it possible to ensure better conduct through the threat of criminal action, is an acknowledgment, however unconscious, that audiences would not modify their behaviour without such force. He believed, however, that politeness should take precedence over rights. One can only imagine how the audience would have reacted if these policies had been introduced at Drury Lane or Covent Garden.

[165] Ibid., p.54
[166] Ibid., p.54
[167] Ibid., p.55
[168] Ibid., p.55

Conclusion

The audiences' relationship to politeness was an ambiguous one. The theatres were patronised by the best of polite society, and yet they behaved in ways that seemed to suggest they did not respect its rules, and that rights were more important. In other ways, they were bound by its conventions. They chose to pass judgement on performers who behaved impolitely and would correct fellow audience members who they felt were doing the same. The diversity of the audience represented the epitome of the new, more relaxed politeness that did not exclude people by virtue of their station at birth.

The inconsistencies that have been highlighted serve to illuminate wider contradictions that existed within notions of politeness. It was highly prized by writers of the time, but potentially its practice was not so clear-cut. In the preface to his reworking of *Fair Quaker* in 1773, Captain Thomas stated that, "it is an incontrovertible truth that the *more vicious we grow in conduct and disposition, the more chaste and refined we become in sentiment and conversation;* for when we have really lost our chastity and reputation, we artfully assume a foreign character, and endeavour by a prudish behaviour to hide the very vices we practice".[169]

Such an attack on politeness shows how it could mask hidden vice. It has been demonstrated that some audience members certainly manipulated it to criminal ends. In its rejection of some of the rules imposed, the behaviour of other members of the audience could be viewed as more honest. They often chose to make their thoughts and feelings unquestionably clear and thus enabled negotiations to take place that ensured that they achieved what they desired; be that a particular play, performer or ticket price. If such negotiations had taken place within the bounds of politeness they would surely have been much more protracted.

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[169] Genest, *Some Account,* Vol. 5, p.398

Thus, in a society that imposed rules of polite behaviour that could be seen as restrictive or stifling,[170] a night at the theatre offered an opportunity to shake them off for a few hours. Even the monarch could enjoy this privilege as this description of George III at the theatre demonstrates.

"There was a gay and hearty jocularity about the King while sitting at a comedy, which a Cynic could hardly have resisted –a something so endearing to see greatness relaxing from its state, throwing off, and apparently glad to throw off, some of the trammels of royalty, and exhibiting, without the least restraint, a full sense of pleasure, at a liberal and enlightened amusement."[171]

Generally, politeness was about other people, about modifying one's outward behaviour to make others comfortable. Audiences subverted that, choosing instead to satisfy personal impulse. If something amused or displeased them, they would shout about it. They were aware, however, that there were limits to such displays and that excessive rudeness by a small minority would not be tolerated. When larger numbers were involved a group mentality took over and the anonymity that this afforded allowed the boundaries of politeness to be pushed even further towards more disruptive behaviour and even riot.

As Lawrence Klein puts it, theatres, along with "coffeehouses, assemblies, pleasure gardens…concerts, and masquerades…provided new sites for polite and heterogeneous interaction".[172] Closer inspection has revealed that beneath this veneer, those interactions were much more complex. While certain rules and rights have been shown to exist it has become clear that they were negotiated and renegotiated by whoever took their place in the auditorium each night.

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[170] H. Berry, 'Rethinking Politeness in Eighteenth-Century England: Moll King's Coffee House and the Significance of Flash Talk'', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society,* Vol. 11 (2001) pp.67-68
[171] Boaden, *Memoirs,* Vol. 1, pp.73-74
[172] Klein, 'Politeness', pp.879-880

What can be certain is that the rules were not so prescriptive as those of the Theatre Charter of the present day. Audiences did not expect to sit in silence but to partake in an interactive relationship with the performers on the stage. Audiences of the 21st century are expected to act with more decorum and reserve than were their counterparts in the Age of Politeness. By placing theatre audiences in the context of this 'Age' it has been possible to show what relevance such notions had beyond the pages of the conduct literature.

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