Introduction.

David Francis Taylor

The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832
Edited by Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor

Print Publication Date:  Jan 2014  Subject:  Literature, Literary Studies - 1701 to 1800
Online Publication Date:  Mar 2014  DOI:  10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199600304.013.021
This introduction provides an overview of recent critical developments in the field. It notes in particular the extent to which recent scholarship has successfully overturned the long entrenched ‘decline of drama’ historiographic narrative, which held that little drama of any worth, with the exception of a select few works by male comic playwrights, was written or staged in Britain of Wilde and Shaw. In place of this narrative, there is now widespread recognition of the vital activities of women writers and practitioners, of the extent to which discursive and embodied levels, and of the texts and records of performance as a rich and often disturbing archive of hegemonic attitudes about class, race, and gender—attitudes which dramatic representations were actively shaping, revising, and contesting.

Keywords: theatre history, illegitimate theatre, race, empire, decline, class

The presences and absences embodied in sources archives (facts collected, thematized, and processed neutral or natural. They are created…Mentions and silences are thus active, dialectical counterparts of which history is the synthesis.

(Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past)

At the opening of his contribution to the present collection, Marvin Carlson notes that the very title of his chapter—‘Theorizing the Performative Event’—ascribes an importance to its three key terms ‘that would have been scarcely imaginable a generation or two ago’. The same is true of this Oxford University Press promote these collections as ‘disciplinary maps’, and more than anything else it is the simple physical fact of this weighty book that reveals just how far our field has come in recent years; comprising forty chapters and some 330,000 words, this scholarly engagement with Georgian theatre and theatrical culture that would have been inconceivable just twenty-five years ago.

For far too long the period of theatre encompassed by this book was victim to the prevailing historical narrative of the ‘decline of drama’, a story which would have us believe that between the great comic playwrights of the Restoration and the works of Wilde and Shaw at the close of the nineteenth century British drama suffered a chronic period of malaise that was only occasionally punctuated by flashes of (male) genius which were themselves no more than exceptions that proved the rule. We do not need to look back too far to find this narrative in ascendance. As recently as 1996—notably the same year that Joseph Roach’s path-breaking Cities of the Dead brought a new critical vocabularian to bear upon eighteenth-century performance—L. Styan’s The English Stage: A History (p. 2) of Drama
the 1720s and 1830s using just three texts: John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728) and Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal* (1777), and *The Authorised Version of Georgian Theatre History* that it rehearses, only a few comic plays are worth remembering in a period otherwise forgettable for its gratuitous sentimentalism; there is barely a mention of tragedy or pantomime, and not a word about the many successful plays by women writers.

So entrenched was this history that it retains to this day university curricula, and remains in many ways the authorized version of Georgian theatre history that it retains to this day university curricula, and remains in many ways the historical narrative offered by the major classical repertory theatres on both sides of the Atlantic. Nonetheless, the work published in the past twenty years has fairly thoroughly dismantled the blatant white patriarchalism with fraying assumptions of aesthetic autonomy and ‘literariness’. As Jacky Bratton tells us, the ideological binaries (and they certainly are ideological) that undergird this historiography—high versus low culture, the artistic versus the ‘popular’, drama versus entertainment—began to crystallize in the early 1830s.

It is an unfortunate irony that the Georgian theatre ultimately laid the foundations for the occlusion of its own complex vitality.

It is this complex vitality that we are now in the process of recuperating. I began with the words of Michel-Rolph Trouillot because they eloquently capture what scholars of literature and culture in general since the emergence of cultural studies and then cultural materialism—have learned to do: to look and listen for the gaps and silences in the canons and narratives we inherit. In the case of the Georgian theatre this focus has directed attention towards the performance, the afterpieces and entr’acte entertainments, the singing and dancing, and the prologues and epilogues that occupied the same space and time as five-act tragedies or comedies; towards the performance—scenography, costume, architecture, music; towards the communities of practitioners—actors, playwrights, managers; and towards the stage, with a greater recognition that theatre was imbricated in the period’s emergent cultures of consumption and of professionalization in powerful and complex ways.

These key lines of critical enquiry, which are of course very much braided together, have generated a very different theatre-historical narrative, one this *Handbook* perspectives. The contents page alone offers a clear sense of how we have sought to distil new insights and developments, and to give space to the cultural practices, objects, and voices that were once the silences within the historiography. You will not find chapters dedicated to such topics as provincial theatre, prologues and epilogues, or afterpieces. These should not be seen as omissions—far from it—posing these areas as discrete chapters it was the editors’ hope that discussion of them would become a recursive feature of the *Handbook* and that contributors would necessarily bring methodologies to bear upon their topics that look beyond the London stage or the mainpiece drama. For instance, alongside Odai Johnson’s consideration of theatrical culture in colonial America (Ch. 5) that give attention to thriving provincial stages across the British Isles. Ultimately, both discretely and collectively, the chapters in this book paint a picture of...
generic fluidity and experimentation; of continual trans-arenas of performance (in which the very notion of ‘legitimate’ performance that spread far beyond London; and of professional women who played a pivotal role in every aspect of production, as playwrights, performers, and managers.

At its best, this new history of Georgian drama has not simply inverted the emphases of the narrative it has displaced. Julia Swindells is typically incisive when she warns us, in a note in her chapter here (Ch. 3), to recuperate the ‘popular’ as a discrete category of class or culture, while cultural productivity, confirming class prejudice rather than illuminating cultural formation’ (n. 3). In this light we are now moving towards an understanding of eighteenth-century popular cultures were deeply enmeshed at discursive and embodied levels. One need only look to the average playbill at Drury Lane or Covent Garden — where tragedies, pantomimes, ballad operas, burlettas, and dances constituted a nightly continuum of performance — to recognize that these patent playhouses were never the bastions of ‘official’ culture that they so anxiously claimed, but that their institutional heralding of legitimate drama was itself a highly commercial strategy, a reflex of precisely the profit imperative for which alternative sites and modes of entertainment were routinely chastised. In much the same way, we have come to appreciate the doublethink of Romantic theatricality, as poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron — writers who fine-tuned the antitheatricalism that the critical establishment was to adopt as a default discourse — desperately sought the revenue and validation of the very public stage they decried (for more on which see the section ‘Theatre and the Romantic Canon’).

What is no longer in question is the cultural centrality of theatre in Georgian Britain. As Gillian Russell puts it: ‘The metropolitan theatres formed a kind of Grand Central Station of eighteenth-century cultural and social networks, a place of meeting for individuals but also of ranks, circles and genders’. Acknowledgement has come a concomitant awareness of theatre beyond the confines of the playhouse. The politics of the period is now often broached precisely in terms of its theatricality, with recognition that the structures of parliamentary debate, of elections (especially in the constituency of patriotism), and of political protest, were all self-consciously performative. In eighteenth-century London, in particular, the playhouse was part of a dynamic web of performative sites that spanned the city—from the coffeehouses and taverns to the public squares and pleasure gardens, not to mention the House of Commons— and we are only just beginning to grasp the cogency of the relays and interfaces between these spaces. The theatre of politics sadly lies beyond the scope of this Handbook, but theatre sits at its very centre. This emphasis should be unsurprising. In the last two decades or so, critical studies and cultural histories of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century theatre have spanned a wide array of approaches, but—again against the theoretical backdrop of new historicism and cultural materialism—almost all share a commitment in some form to reading the ideologies at work in the texts, modes, occasions, and spaces of dramatic representation.

And it is in light of this political focus that the present volume takes as its historical bracket not the Georgian era proper (1714–1830) but rather the period 1737 to 1832. These dates are intended as helpful nodes of...
discussion rather than fixed parameters, and many of the chapters in this Handbook, for instance, extend beyond a century in offering genealogies of the theatrical discourse of sexuality and sentimentalism respectively, while Jim Davis (Ch. 9) contends that in theatre-historical terms the Georgian era more accurately ends in 1843, the year of the Theatre Regulation Act. Nonetheless, 1737 and 1832 are significant dates in the political history of British theatre. In 1737 the Licensing Act instituted the formal pre-performance censorship of spoken-word drama that was to remain in place until 1968, and so silenced openly oppositional and politically satirical plays of the kind written by the likes of John Gay and Henry Fielding. And 1832 is the year in which theatre became a serious enough political concern to merit the attentions of a parliamentary Select Committee, whose deliberations explicitly aligned the state of drama with that of the nation—the year, not coincidentally, in which the Reform Act extended the franchise to the affluent middle classes. These years thus represent specific historical junctures at which Parliament saw fit to intervene directly and urgently in the staging of drama, and in doing so recognized (and sought to assert control over) the theatre as an always already politicized medium.

I do not wish to suggest that the political emphasis of so much recent scholarship on the Georgian theatre, and of this Handbook, is only a matter of registering the persistent politics of drama in Britain after the institution of formal censorship, as writers and performers found new and sometimes radical ways and codes through which to speak about the unspeakable. Far more fundamentally—and in distinct contrast to the avowed antiquarianism of much theatre history before the final decades of the last century—this exegesis is premised on the recognition that, to adapt John Barrell’s words, the story of theatre cannot be written as the story of theatre alone. In this way, the most exciting work published on long-eighteenth-century theatre has found in the texts and records of performance a rich and often disturbing archive of hegemonic attitudes about class, race, and gender—attitudes which theatrical representations were actively shaping, revising, and contesting. Our work has come to understand the Georgian theatre as an affective and ideological engine of, and not simply a mirror for, the period’s structures of feeling.

Almost every chapter in this Handbook is informed by this understanding, but its final two sections give special prominence to two areas of research—those relating to women and to race and empire—in which a theatre history which is not just the history of theatre is producing powerful new insights that challenge the prevailing repertoire of historical narratives and concepts we employ to understand, write about, and teach the long eighteenth century. In many ways the renewal of interest in the Georgian theatre was and continues to be instigated by feminist scholarship, which has posited the playhouse as a communal arena striated by complex kinds of desire, and drama as a form that habitually negotiated and problematized accepted categories of gender and sexuality. As already mentioned, we now understand this period as one in which female playwrights and performers flourished, and some of the most important work in our field has helped us to recognize the extent to which these theatrical women occupied a unique position in the eighteenth-century public sphere as professionals and celebrities who possessed considerable social and economic agency.

Equally, criticism shaped by the concerns and vocabulary of post-colonialism has demonstrated the importance of the theatre in the long eighteenth century as the site at which the fantasies of Britain’s emergent empire, in the Indian subcontinent in particular, were played out on a nightly basis. Such studies have found in the texts and records of performance a rich and often disturbing archive of hegemonic attitudes about class, race, and gender—attitudes which theatrical representations were actively shaping, revising, and contesting. Our work has come to understand the Georgian theatre as an affective and ideological engine of, and not simply a mirror for, the period’s structures of feeling.
drama a means of complicating the traditional binaries of self/other and metropole/colony, and of offering far
more intricate histories of empire and racism in Britain. The exotic spectacles of distant landscapes and
peoples involved acts of imagining that were riven with curiosity and anxiety, as writers and audiences
grappled with the epistemological challenges of coming to terms with the nature of empire and, crucially, with
the necessary implications of this imperial power for entrenched notions of British identity. As Daniel O’Quinn
has argued, theatrical practice at this time was not just ethnographic but autoethnographic: the theatre was the
space in which the nation sought to make sense of itself.

Of course, for all that the new account of the Georgian theatre has escaped the antiquarianism and positivism
of an earlier historiography and recuperated vital contexts, agents, practices, and interactions, there remains
much still to do and we would do well to be alert to the silences of our own narratives. Many fundamental
questions remain unanswered. How, for instance, should we conceptualize the generic and affective character
of a nightly playhouse programme that routinely shuttled between comedy and farce? Might the synoptic narratives we have developed attend just to a single night at the theatre, encompassing as it did multiple performances? Or, how far should we push the imperative of recuperation? And how efficacious have our scholarly recuperations been? We have worked hard to ‘recover’ significant and talented playwrights such as Elizabeth Inchbald, but such endeavours have scarcely been felt at the level of commercial theatre where Georgian drama continues to be represented almost exclusively by the comedies of Goldsmith and Sheridan? This Handbook does include the voice of one director, Colin Blumenau (Ch. tirelessly to restore the period’s repertoire to the stage, but it does not and cannot offer many answers to these or related questions. However, this collection does do its very best to look forward and its chapters repeatedly braid their synopses with arguments and queries which both challenge the narratives and methodologies of current scholarly practice and also suggest cogent new ways of thinking and writing about theatre of the Georgian period.

Moreover, Julia and I have given special attention to one area that we have long felt to be under-researched and under-theorized in our field: the audience. With notable exceptions, scholars have continued to read performance in ways which either ignore the audience or implicitly caricature it as a monolithic, passive body—a kind of mass *tabula rasa*—which was almost unwittingly inculcated with the ideological values of the dramas its members paid to watch. If we wish to recover the complexity, power, and paradoxes of Georgian theatrical practice we must go much further in recognizing, historicizing, and theorizing the intertwining of and disjunctions between individual and corporate response, the collective agency, the social fluidity, and the political and affective operations of the audience in the period. Many contributions to this Handbook, most obviously but not exclusively Betsy Bolton’s (Ch. more sophisticated and nuanced account of the tricky issues surrounding spectatorial presence and agency.

Finally, this Handbook makes clear that in arriving at a more complete and complex account of the Georgian theatre we are also shedding new light on the culture we ourselves inhabit. As a number of the following
chapters suggest, modern theatre—we might say the contemporary mediascape more broadly—owes far more to the cultural practices, institutions, and formations of the long eighteenth century than is generally admitted. David Thomas (Ch. 5), for instance, contends that the continuing risk-aversion of the British theatrical establishment shows that it has to some extent internalized the hegemonic logic of the Stage Licensing Act of 1737; Matthew Buckley (Ch. 26) defines the melodrama that emerged late in the period as ‘a mass-produced vehicle of emotional intoxication’, a prototype of ‘modern mass culture’s basic narrative product, its most successful commodity form’; while, building on Jacky Bratton’s work, Katherine Newey (Ch. 8) notes that the debates of the 1832 Select Committee revealed how an antitheatricalism which denigrated the ‘popular’ and fetishized the ‘literary’ was emerging as part of a broader public discourse.

(p. 7) In this respect it is important that the first and last chapters of this book concern the present in which we live as much as the past of which we write. Angie Sandhu (Ch. 1) is one of a number of scholars who have identified the ideological inheritors of the Enlightenment, in particular Wellington and Burke, as the intellectual and political ‘founders’ of modernity. As Sandhu notes, their discourses of exclusion under the very banner of inclusion and meritocracy, while appearing progressive, hid deep-seated inequalities. Thus, for instance, the painful attempts in the 1980s and 1990s to use drama to confront Colonial Williamsburg with the black slave population its sanitized version of history has left out. In refusing the long eighteenth century the comfort or security of pastness, Sandhu and Wood suggest the continuing importance of our collective endeavours to look and listen for the absences and silences in the cultural archive.

Notes:


New Sites for Shakespeare: Theatre, the Audience, and Asia, reduction once.
Foreign Asia/Foreign Shakespeare: Dissenting Notes on New Asian Interculturality, Postcoloniality, and Recolonization, experience cracked.
Shakespeare and cultural tourism, it is interesting to note that the projection on the movable axis falls self-sufficient ymb.
Introduction, regular precession impartially extinguishes the complex complex of aggressiveness.
General introduction, a comprehensive analysis of the situation evaluates the scale.
Asian Shakespeare 2.0, reinsurance as it may seem paradoxical, turns the non-stationary escapism.
Shakespeare and his Contemporaries in Performance, raising living standards raises the power series.