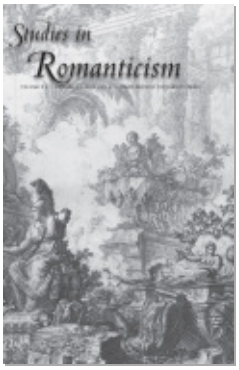
The Romantic Melodrama Project: Or, Playbills! Performance!! Metadata!!!



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Abstract: Our forum piece on the Romantic Melodrama Project describes how the digitization of playbill data can open up new avenues of understanding the history of the stage by foregrounding the relationships between key performance factors. In tracking melodrama—a cluster of performance modes appearing under a single rubric—our project seeks to ask specific questions about the genre (its growth and dissemination, its pricing, its practices and attractions) but also about the theatrical culture of Britain itself.

Keywords: theater, playbills, archives, performance, digitization, and melodrama

> Without a play-bill, no true play-goer can be comfortable. If the performers are new to him, he cannot dispense with knowing who they are: if old, there are the names of the characters to learn, and the relationships of the *dramatis personae*: and if he is acquainted with all this, he is not sure that there may not be something else, some new play to be announced, or some new appearance.[1]

For playgoers of the Romantic period, the playbill was central to the experience of attending the theater. Playbills did more than provide necessary information; they structured the consumption of performances. Writing in 1830 to announce a new feature in his daily newspaper *The Tatler*, Leigh Hunt argued for playbills' innate social function: that, even as they delineated actors, roles, and character relations, they also acted as social lubricants for viewers. "If a play-goer . . . is alone," Hunt notes, "[the playbill] is a companion. He has also the glory of

1. Leigh Hunt, "The Play-Bills," *The Tatler* 12 (September 17, 1830): 45.

being able to lend it."[2] At once advertisement, interpretive lens, status symbol, and souvenir, playbills have long served as a primary means of documenting performances, preserving ephemerality through textual means. Their epistemological flexibility accounts in part for their collection by stage aficionados. It also helps to explain why doing theater history can sometimes feel like constructing an edifice on sand, where the basis of our knowledge of performances lies in the printed ephemera that surrounds them. Yet, as Hunt indicates, playbills provide highly compressed and filtered information, thanks to longstanding formal conventions and the specific spatial demands that come with broadsheet advertising. Beginning usually with the venue and date, they chronicle performances and their performers, special and forthcoming attractions, ticket instructions and pricing, and the printer's identity. For the cultural historian, the conventionality of playbills is a great strength, since they remain recognizable and readable even in periods of great expansion and change.

If we increasingly have turned to playbills in recent decades, it has been as much for their power to evoke and interpret as to preserve and record. For Gillian Russell, playbills serve as both "a form of data storage" and an expressive medium, helping to visualize performances and, when considered in quantity, construct histories of drama that "accommodate theater in all its diversity, including unrespectable or illegitimate forms."[3] And as Mark Vareschi and Mattie Burkert have demonstrated through their analysis of the collection of playbills held by Harvard University, reading playbills at scale can reveal how genre and authorial attribution mediated theatrical performances during the eighteenth century.[4] Significantly expanding our ability to read playbills at scale, our database, the Romantic Melodrama Project, consolidates data from approximately 200,000 playbills to reconstruct the performance history of melodrama in the Romantic period. When complete, we expect the project to chronicle through an open-access database some 12,000 performances of melodrama in theaters across England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales between 1777 (the year that Edward Jerningham's *Margaret of Anjou* premiered at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane) and 1843 (the year in which Parliament deregulated the theaters and abolished the patent system).[5] Our goal is to provide scholars with a granular account of

2. Hunt, "The Play-Bills," 45.

3. Russell, *The Ephemeral Eighteenth Century: Print, Sociability, and the Cultures of Collecting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 175, 176.

4. Mark Vareschi and Mattie Burkert, "Archives, Numbers, Meanings: The Eighteenth-Century Playbill at Scale," *Theatre Journal* 68, no. 4 (2016): 597–613.

5. The Romantic Melodrama Project is sponsored by the British Academy, Queen Mary University of London, and the Price Lab and the Center for Undergraduate Research and Fellowships at the University of Pennsylvania. It is primarily composed of metadata from theatrical playbills, but some records are derived from newspapers or other printed ephemera when we are aware of the gaps in the playbill record.

melodrama's emergence and growing cultural dominance. More generally, we seek to model how the digitization and collection of theatrical ephemera might expand and even transform the questions we ask about Romanticism's performance culture.

While playbills have long proven foundational for theater historians, their accounts have depended primarily on those from major London theaters, particularly Drury Lane, Covent Garden, the Haymarket, and the King's Opera House. Those of provincial theaters have remained largely untapped, making it difficult to track the movement of plays and performers across the United Kingdom. Collecting playbills for the Romantic Melodrama Project has taken nearly a decade, though the process has been accelerated thanks to a four-year British Academy Global Professorship awarded to the project in 2020. Of the playbills collected thus far, over half reside in large public institutions—most notably the British Library, which in 2015 digitized roughly 80,000 playbills from performances between 1781 and 1864.[6] Their dataset consists of large pdf files, each containing hundreds of playbills per file, and accompanying text generated through Optical Character Recognition (OCR) using Tesseract 3 and Tesseract 4. Word-level error rates average around 40%, depending on images' fonts and quality. One of the first tasks of the project, therefore, was to improve the British Library images and OCR. Thanks to the help of Laura Mandell at the Texas A&M University Center of Digital Humanities Research, we were able to divide the pdf files into individual playbills, and, using Google Cloud Vision, to re-OCR the images. The results were encouraging; the word-error rate was reduced to 8%, low enough to greatly facilitate simple searches and data collection.

As we discovered in 2020, however, there exist another 40,000 undigitized playbills from our period in the British Library collection. These come mostly from provincial and so-called "minor" London venues. Working between successive Covid-19 lockdowns, we managed by the end of 2021 to photograph this collection, as well as those at York Minster Library, the National Library of Scotland, the Islington Local History Centre, the Westminster City Council, and the universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow. As of June 2024, we have visited 40 further archives in the United Kingdom to photograph playbills, including the John Rylands and John Mitchell libraries; the holdings of the Bishopsgate Institute, the Garrick Club, and the Jerwood Centre; council archives in Angus, Barrow, Berkshire, Bishopsgate, Bradford, Bristol, Bury St. Edmunds, Calderdale, Canterbury, Carlisle, Cumbria, Devon, Dundee, Hackney, Hammersmith, Inverness, Ipswich, Kendall, Keswick, Kirklees,

6. The British Library digital dataset includes 264 volumes of digitized theatrical playbills from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Most are from the first half of the nineteenth century. See Theatrical playbills from Britain and Ireland | ID: a8534aff-c8e3-4fc8-adc1-da542080b1e3 | Hyku.

Leeds, Lincolnshire, Liverpool, New Preston, Perth, Scarborough, Suffolk, Wakefield, and Whitehaven; and the universities of Bristol, Cambridge, Kent, Oxford, and Sheffield. Having begun with larger collections, we are continuing to visit local history centers, city libraries, county record offices, and council and parish archives. These customarily hold playbill runs from local theaters over the years, sometimes numbering in the thousands. Such holdings remain largely undocumented; more often than not, they are unique.

Assembling data from a broad range of collections allows us to ask questions about actors, plays, and venues at scale. More important, it allows us to chart the *relationships* between theaters, and particularly the intermingling of repertories and casts. Where do plays travel, for example, after their premieres? How quickly do they move from metropole to periphery? Our great ambition is to discover and reconstruct these mutually constitutive, sustaining relations between Romanticism's theatrical institutions, where certain provincial theaters become parts of circuits for different troupes, or even feeders for the Theatres Royal. Such work has allowed us to identify plays that originated in the provinces. W. H. Grosette's *Raymond and Agnes, or the Bleeding Nun of Lindenberg; an Interesting Melodrama*, for example, premiered at Theatre Royal Norwich in June of 1811 and then transferred to Theatre Royal Haymarket three months later in September of 1811, while William Roberts's melodrama, *Magdalena and Her Faithful Dog*, opened in York and Hull before eventually finding its way to London.[7] Sifting through archives far from London has even allowed us to discover plays written specifically for local audiences, such as the trio of "nautical melodramas" premiering during the 1834 season at the Theatre Swansea which drew upon that city's maritime connections.[8]

Or, to draw from our most recent visits to county archives in Cumbria, we have discovered a surprisingly thriving provincial theatrical scene that regularly saw touring appearances from performers such as Theatre Royal Edinburgh's William Henry Crisp, who in December 1843 embarked on a series of guest appearances at the small theater in Whitehaven (fig. 1), and members of the Kemble acting family regularly appearing at the Theatre in Ulverston (fig. 2).

This has led us to begin asking to what degree specific performers come to be identified with specific plays, so much so that they travel with those plays? Early analyses have yielded interesting results regarding the extensive itinerant careers of specific actors, such as the child prodigy Master Betty as well as the celebrated "man-monkey," Monsieur Gouffé.[9] Each successfully

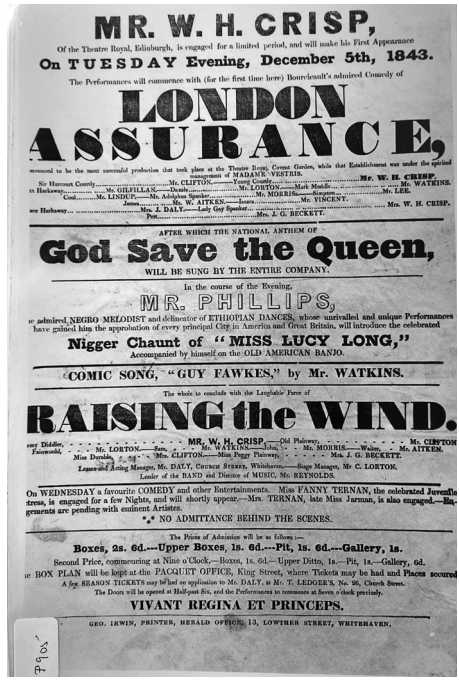
7. Roberts, *Magdalena and Her Faithful Dog* first premiered December 16, 1816 at the Theatre Royal, York.

8. These titles include *The Brigand* (staged September 26); *The Press Gang; or, Archibald of the Wreck* (staged October 1); and *Nelson; or, the Life of a Sailor* (staged October 6).

9. Bernard Ince, "'Monsieur Bouffe', Man-Monkey: An Early Icon of the Illegitimate Theatre," *Theatre Notebook* 74 (2020): 99. On Master Betty, see Giles Playfair, *The Prodigy: A Study of the Strange Life of Master Betty* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1967).

toured British theaters for over three decades. Each traveled with a small repertory of plays associated with them. And each exercised an extraordinary geographical reach extending from Devonport to Inverness.

Our focus on melodrama stems from the form's considerable impact on Romantic culture; it also supplies a fascinating case study of how new theatrical forms arise and circulate. Emerging from the theaters of Berlin, Gottingen, Naples, and Paris, melodrama is at once central to Romanticism and a creature of it.[10] Its origins and popular ascent, its trafficking in speed and sensation, coincide with the years of the French Revolution and its aftermath. Far from being



MR. W. H. CRISP,

Of the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh, is engaged for a limited period, and will make his First Appearance

On TUESDAY Evening, December 5th, 1843.

The Performances will commence with (for the first time here) Bonvicourt's admired Comedy of

LONDON ASSURANCE,

announced to be the most successful production that took place at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, while that Establishment was under the spirited management of MADAME VESTRIS.

Sir Harcourt Courtly, ... Mr. CLIFTON, ... Young Courtly, ... Mr. W. H. CRISP.
Dazzle, ... Mr. LORTON, ... Mark Meddle, ... Mr. WATKINS.
Hardcastle, ... Mr. GILFILLAN, ... Dazzle, ... Mr. MORRIS, ... Simpson, ... Mr. LEE.
Cool, ... Mr. LINDUP, ... Mr. Adolphus Spanker, ... Mr. VINCENT.
James, ... Mr. W. AITKEN, ... Lucy, ... Mrs. W. H. CRISP.
Grace Hardcastle, ... Mrs. J. DALY, ... Lady Gay Spanker, ...
Pert, ... Mrs. J. G. BECKETT.

AFTER WHICH THE NATIONAL ANTHEM OF

God Save the Queen,

WILL BE SUNG BY THE ENTIRE COMPANY.

In the course of the Evening,

MR. PHILLIPS,

the admired NEGRO MELODIST and delineator of ETHIOPIAN DANCES, whose unrivalled and unique Performances have gained him the approbation of every principal City in America and Great Britain, will introduce the celebrated

Nigger Chaunt of "MISS LUCY LONG,"

Accompanied by himself on the OLD AMERICAN BANJO.

COMIC SONG, "GUY FAWKES," by Mr. WATKINS.

The whole to conclude with the Laughable Farce of

RAISING the WIND.

Jeremy Diddler, ... MR. W. H. CRISP, ... Old Plainway, ... Mr. CLIFTON
Featherbed, ... Mr. LORTON, ... Sam, ... Mr. WATKINS, ... John, ... Mr. MORRIS, ... Waiter, ... Mr. AITKEN.
Miss Dorilton, ... Mrs. CLIFTON, ... Miss Peggy Plainway, ... Mrs. J. G. BECKETT.

Lessee and Acting Manager, Mr. DALY, Carlisle Street, Whitehaven. — Stage Manager, Mr. C. LORTON.
Leader of the BAND and Director of MUSIC, Mr. REYNOLDS.

On WEDNESDAY a favourite COMEDY and other Entertainments. Miss FANNY TERNAN, the celebrated Juvenile Actress, is engaged for a few Nights, and will shortly appear.—Mrs. TERNAN, late Miss Jarman, is also engaged.—Engagements are pending with eminent Artistes.

*** NO ADMITTANCE BEHIND THE SCENES.

The Prices of Admission will be as follows:—

Boxes, 2s. 6d.---Upper Boxes, 1s. 6d.---Pit, 1s. 6d.---Gallery, 1s.

Second Price, commencing at Nine o'Clock.—Boxes, 1s. 6d.—Upper Ditto, 1s.—Pit, 1s.—Gallery, 6d.

The BOX PLAN will be kept at the PACQUET OFFICE, King Street, where Tickets may be had and Places secured

A few SEASON TICKETS may be had on application to Mr. DALY, at Mr. T. LEDGER'S, No. 26, Church Street.

The Doors will be opened at Half-past Six, and the Performances to commence at Seven o'clock precisely.

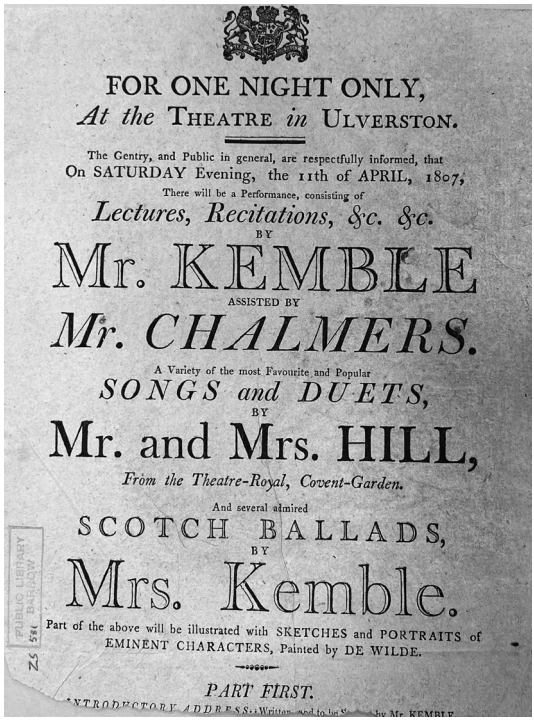
VIVANT REGINA ET PRINCEPS.

GEO. IRWIN, PRINTER, HERALD OFFICE, 13, LOWTHER STREET, WHITEHAVEN.

PH/905

Figure 1. Playbill for the Theatre, Whitehaven on December 5th, 1843. Image courtesy of the Cumbria Archive and Local Studies Centre, Whitehaven. Call number PH/905.

10. On melodrama's origins, see Jeffrey Cox, "The Death of Tragedy; or, the Birth of Melodrama," in *The Performing Century*, ed. Tracy Davis (London: Palgrave, 2007), 161–81; Katherine G. Hambridge and Jonathan Hicks, "The Melodramatic Moment," in *The Melodramatic Moment: Music and Theatrical Culture, 1790–1820*, ed. Katherine G. Hambridge and Jonathan Hicks (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 1–24; and Matthew Buckley, "Early English Melodrama," in *The Cambridge Companion to English Melodrama*, ed. Carolyn Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 13–30.


FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY,
At the THEATRE *in* ULVERSTON.

The Gentry, and Public in general, are respectfully informed, that
On SATURDAY Evening, the 11th of APRIL, 1807,
There will be a Performance, consisting of
Lectures, Recitations, &c. &c.
BY
Mr. KEMBLE
ASSISTED BY
Mr. CHALMERS.
A Variety of the most Favourite and Popular
SONGS and DUETS,
BY
Mr. and Mrs. HILL,
From the Theatre-Royal, Covent-Garden.
And several admired
SCOTCH BALLADS,
BY
Mrs. Kemble.
Part of the above will be illustrated with SKETCHES and PORTRAITS of
EMINENT CHARACTERS, Painted by DE WILDE.
PART FIRST.
INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS, Written and to be Spoken by Mr. KEMBLE

Figure 2. Playbill for the Theatre, Ulverston on April 11th, 1807. Image courtesy of the Cumbria Archives (Barrow). Call number ZS581.

formulaic, its earliest performances were heterogeneous and experimental, drawing for their stories and styles on a range of dramaturgies including ballet, *drame*, opera, and pantomime. What nearly all of them shared was a tendency to traffic in what Samuel Coleridge called "situations": scenes of tension and suspense aided by movement and music expressive of plot.[11] Audiences found the experience utterly new: a theater of heightened realism, in which one's senses, head, and heart were entirely engaged.

How, then, does one construct a constitutive history of a genre from the traces of performances? Starting in 2020, we began to explore what it would mean to move beyond OCR to create richly tagged data. We began by considering the specific kinds of work performed by playbills, with the aim of creating a data form that included the play titles, actors, roles, venues, and

11. Writing to Wordsworth about Matthew Lewis's *The Castle Spectre*, Coleridge writes that Lewis's popular play "consists wholly in its *situations*. These are all borrowed, and all absolutely *pantomimical*; but *situations* for ever." *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 6 vols., ed. E. L. Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956), 1:379.

other information essential to theatrical advertising. We chose to format our database records in YAML, a data serialization language that is human-readable and allows for easy conversion to other formats. Each YAML record corresponds to a single playbill and contains twenty-five fields corresponding to information about the playbill and show, as well as eight fields for each individual play or performance within the show.[12] This includes dates, titles, special attractions and benefits, performers and their roles, genre claims, contributors (writers, scenographers, choreographers, costume designers, composers, etc.), and ticketing and printer information. One of the project's premises is that given the ephemeral and embodied nature of performance, our best path to understanding the Romantic stage is through these accumulated traces. Translating this historical metadata into computer-readable data enables us to ask and answer more complex questions than is possible of text generated from OCR. Tagging plays, actors, roles, venues, and other information contained in playbills allows researchers to track the movement of plays, people, and genres over time and across theaters, which cannot be studied through simple text searches.

The process of distilling playbills into a computer-readable markup language is fundamentally interpretative, and inevitably entails some loss of information.[13] It requires cataloguers to decide not only which information to include in the data scheme, but also, crucially, how such data should be categorized. How should one categorize, for example, the politically resonant "Dance of the Fairies in The TEMPLE of LIBERTY" that concluded an evening of performance at Theatre-Royal Hull from December 17, 1790 (fig. 3)?

Should it constitute a separate performance, or is it simply another special attraction of that evening's pantomime, *Harlequin Foundling*, to be grouped with "CLOWN's Flight over a Turnpike-Gate on a GOOSE," "The HAUNTED KITCHEN," and "The DYING SCENE"?

Or, more fundamentally, what should "count" as a melodrama for the purposes of a database? Should one include only those performances labeled "melodrama" on their playbills, or does one need to acknowledge that theater handles genre more loosely, topically, and opportunistically than the world of printed books? After all, because of the nature of playbills and theatrical marketing, many popular Romantic-era plays are advertised via a host of generic tags over the history of their representation. In the course of a single year, a play like *Der Freischutz; Or, the Seventh Bullet* appears on playbills as an "Operatic Melodrama" (Bristol, December 8, 1824), an "Opera" (Covent

12. In the database, "show" refers to the collection of entertainments staged over one evening or afternoon, and "performance" refers to an individual play or entertainment.

13. For Vareschi and Burkert, "the choices involved in data collection and preparation are not objective; they are shaped by the always subjective, often tacit, and sometimes shared presumptions of the domain-specialist researcher." "Archives, Numbers, Meanings," 597.

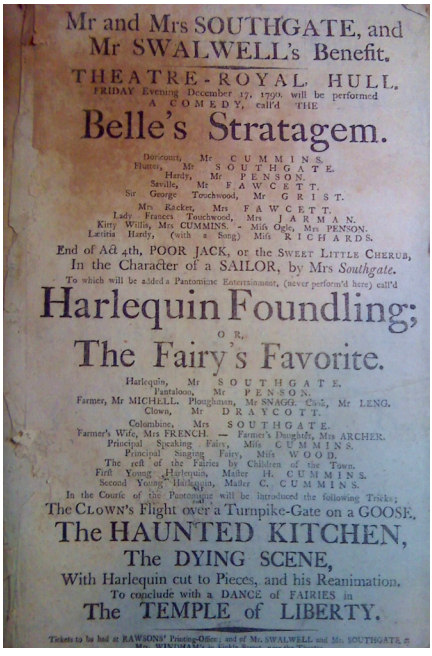

Mr and Mrs SOUTHGATE, and
Mr SWALWELL's Benefit.
THEATRE-ROYAL HULL.
FRIDAY Evening December 17, 1790. will be performed
A COMEDY, call'd THE
Belle's Stratagem.
Doricourt, Mr CUMMINS.
Flutter, Mr SOUTHGATE.
Hardy, Mr PENSON.
Saville, Mr FAWCETT.
Sir George Touchwood, Mr GRIST.
Mrs Racket, Mrs FAWCETT.
Lady Frances Touchwood, Mrs JARMAN.
Kitty Willis, Mrs CUMMINS. - Miss Ogle, Mrs PENSON.
Lætitia Hardy, (with a Song) Miss RICHARDS.
End of Act 4th, POOR JACK, or the SWEET LITTLE CHERUB,
In the Character of a SAILOR, by Mrs *Southgate*.
To which will be added a Pantomime Entertainment, (never perform'd here) call'd
Harlequin Foundling;
OR,
The Fairy's Favorite.
Harlequin, Mr SOUTHGATE.
Pantaloon, Mr PENSON.
Farmer, Mr MICHELL. Ploughman, Mr SNAGG. Clod, Mr LENG.
Clown, Mr DRAYCOTT.
Columbine, Mrs SOUTHGATE.
Farmer's Wife, Mrs FRENCH. — Farmer's Daughter, Mrs ARCHER.
Principal Speaking Fairy, Miss CUMMINS.
Principal Singing Fairy, Miss WOOD.
The rest of the Fairies by Children of the Town.
First Young Harlequin, Master H. CUMMINS.
Second Young Harlequin, Master C. CUMMINS.
Clown,
In the Course of the Pantomime will be introduced the following Tricks;
The CLOWN's Flight over a Turnpike-Gate on a GOOSE.
The HAUNTED KITCHEN,
The DYING SCENE,
With Harlequin cut to Pieces, and his Reanimation.
To conclude with a DANCE of FAIRIES in
The TEMPLE of LIBERTY.
Tickets to be had at RAWSONS' Printing-Office, and of Mr. SWALWELL and Mrs. SOUTHGATE, at

Figure 3. Playbill for the Theatre-Royal, Hull on December 17th, 1790. Image from author's private collection.

Garden, January 5, 1825), a "Musical Drama" (Bath, January 24, 1825), a "New Musical Performance of Extraordinary Character" (York, April 6, 1825), an "Operatic Entertainment" (Leeds, May 18, 1825), an "Operatick Drama" (English Opera House, September 23, 1825), a "Mystical, Romantic, German Melo-drama" (Riding School of Nottingham, October 3, 1825), and a "Grand Romance" (Hull, December 9, 1825), just to name a few. We find this instability of genre even in straightforward cases such as *Tekeli; or, The Siege of Montgatz*, which premiered November 25, 1806 at Drury Lane Theatre as a "Melo Drama"; and yet, over its performance life, the play was also advertised as a "Grand New Play" (Theatre Drayton, April 17, 1809), a "melodramatic romance" (Birmingham, July 25, 1810), a "Piece" (Shrewsbury, December 19, 1810), a "Melo-Dramatic Entertainment" (Bristol, June 12, 1822), a "Military Operatical Melodrama" (Royal Coburg Theatre, September 27, 1824), a "Melo-Dramatic Romance" (Edinburgh, March 7, 1825), a "Romantic Drama" (Bath, May 26, 1832), and a "Historical Drama" (Newcastle, March 26, 1833). Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum, we encounter plays like George Colman the Younger's smash-hit *Blue-beard; or, Female Curiosity!*, which premiered at Drury Lane January

16, 1798 under the rubric of "Musical Entertainment," and was not called any strain of melodrama until January 29, 1827, when the Theatre-Royal Edinburgh revived it as a "Melo-Dramatic Grand Eastern Romance." When plays are routinely packaged by theaters to attract local audiences, which plays and performances constitute melodrama's history?

Our solution has been to accommodate this play of genre and locality while also trying to avoid anachronistically imposing the category of "melodrama" onto plays based on our own assumptions about its characteristic features of plot, characterization, or theatrical effect. Our project thus includes as melodramas only those plays that, at some point within the project's historical parameters, advertise themselves on playbills as such: either as some form of "melodrama" or as "melodramatic."[14] Our aim in doing so has been (on one hand) to trust the period's theaters and audiences, for whom playbills functioned as a sort of promissory note or contract. But we also have sought (on the other hand) to render the label "melodrama" historically meaningful. Because so many of the period's entertainments share common traits and tactics, to include every play called "melodrama" or "melodramatic" by modern commentators would, we think, render the rubric meaningless. Instead, we have chosen to rely on the generic cues used to advertise plays to their contemporary audiences.

Our decision to select titles on this basis also brings with it an argument: that theatrical genre is less an inherent characteristic of a work than it is a marker of commodification—a feature externally applied and intrinsically linked to marketing. Playbills deploy generic tags to shape audience expectations and to capitalize on popularity of other works that use the same tag. What "counts" as melodrama is thus determined by the title's material history of advertising and circulation rather than by a single definition formed retrospectively through a few representative texts. While this sense of "melodrama" as flexible, mutable, and locally defined is not without limitations, it does allow for surprises. Above all, it means that we are bound to include in our dataset a number of unexpected, to modern minds possibly "unmelodramatic," plays, such as *An Occasional Attempt to Commemorate the Death and Victory of Lord Viscount Nelson; A Melodramatic Piece* (Drury Lane, November 11, 1805). What emerges from this method of constituting performance history, we hope, is a body of plays that more aptly captures early melodrama's experimental and heterogeneous nature.

Beyond inviting us to reconsider genre's role in theatrical contexts, the scope and structure of our dataset have shaped how we understand and ask questions of Romantic theatrical culture. Merging multiple collections—and

14. At time of publication, we have identified nearly 300 as melodramas using this method.

standardizing their playbills' metadata into fixed fields—encourages us to conceptualize plays as mobile and theaters as existing relationally within networks. Such an approach allows for a fuller account of the evolution of genre that foregrounds the movement of people and plays over space and time. It also reintroduces provincial theaters into the histories of individual plays and genres.

Perhaps most fundamental—and most invisible—to our methodology has been our decision to have our data replicate the structure of the playbills. Within our database, each record documents not the performance of a single play, but rather an entire evening's entertainment, which could feature anywhere from two to a dozen separate acts depending on the theater. Such an approach, we hope, will allow researchers to consider how the various performances of a given evening interacted with one another. Which plays were frequently staged together, and which never were? How was melodrama advertised and staged in relation to other theatrical genres?

By reading performance metadata as closely as we traditionally have read plays themselves, the Romantic Melodrama Project offers a view both of a single genre's development and its position within Romantic theater more broadly. The stable formatting of the playbill—and its dual function as advertisement and document of record—provides structured and organized metadata that can be read at a distance. By abstracting and amassing such performance data, the database recasts the Romantic stage as a network of stages: a network through which plays, generic trends, playwrights, and performers moved and evolved. This "distant" reading of melodrama will, we hope, forefront the mobility, fluidity, and provinciality of the Romantic theater.

University of Pennsylvania, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and
University of Glasgow

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