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'Love, bitter wrong, freedom, sad pity, and lust of power': politics and performance in 1820

Malcolm Chase

The year 1820 was one of European revolution and insurgency from which Britain was emphatically not exempt.¹ Viewing these twelve months through the optic of theatrical performance considerably broadens our understanding of popular culture and opinion at this time. Freedom of political assembly and expression had been stringently curtailed by the repressive measures collectively known as the Six Acts, pushed through Parliament in the last days of 1819. Yet the much-longer established censorship of drama by the State counted for little as theatres and their audiences contrived to air profound questions about the nature of monarchical authority, the motives of the government that acted in the King's name, and the tendency of political authority, left unchecked, to over-reach itself.

'Paine thought that he lived in the age of revolution, but the present moment better deserves that epithet', wrote a leading radical in September 1820.² In February the heir to the French throne had been assassinated. Although the consequences of this were contained, there were revolutions in Spain and the Kingdom of Naples in March and in July, and in Portugal in August. Continental events were scrutinized anxiously by the Government as it dealt with the backwash of popular revulsion at the infamous Peterloo massacre of August 1819. Government policy is fully intelligible only in a pan-European context. Led by a Prime Minister (Lord Liverpool) who had witnessed the storming of the Bastille in 1789, the Cabinet was the intended victim *en masse* of an assassination plot in February. Named Cato Street, after the London mews where it was discovered, this conspiracy was just one episode in a national pattern of insurgency across the United Kingdom during the first half of the year. On Good Friday there was an uprising in the West Riding textile district centred on Huddersfield, followed on Easter Monday by a more serious insurgency in west-central Scotland. A second Yorkshire uprising occurred a week later. Each rising was accompanied by peripheral violence and other disconcerting episodes that suggested the maturation of a broader conspiracy. Meanwhile agrarian disturbances were endemic in western Ireland.

The government also uncomfortably weathered a general election. Until 1868 the monarch's death required one and George III had died on 29 January (allegedly his last words were to quote Shakespeare's *King Lear*: 'Tom's a cold'). 1820 should therefore also have been a coronation year; but crowning the former Prince Regent as George IV was postponed by a government fearful of disorder in London, as it tried to cope with mutinous tendencies in the Brigade of Guards. In the capital especially the popular mood was caught up in support for Queen Caroline, estranged wife of the new monarch, from whom George scandalously – and ultimately unsuccessfully – now sought a divorce. The affair constituted a politically potent coda to the events of the first half of the year. Liverpool's Ministry, forced by the King, tried to push through Parliament a bill of pains and penalties (effectively a prosecution for adultery) against Queen Caroline. The proceedings took a deeply theatrical form with extra galleries erected in the House of Lords to accommodate those wishing to watch the spectacle.³

¹ For a detailed study see M. Chase, *1820: disorder and stability in the United Kingdom* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2013).

² Richard Carlile, *Republican* 15 September 1820, p. 79.

³ Chase, *1820*, pp. 10, 146-9, 171, 173-86.

Meanwhile theatres themselves routinely became sites of contention between rival supporters of King and Queen. This was an extension of a well-attested tendency among contemporary audiences, in the words of the playwright Thomas Morton, ‘to force passages never meant by the author into political meanings ... their applause is enthusiastic, and their dislikes very violently expressed. I do not know anything more terrible than an enraged audience.’⁴ It was probably events in 1820 that William Moore, a trustee of Covent Garden’s owners, had in mind when he told a parliamentary select committee: ‘sentences which have been uttered in old plays have been taken up at the time they were performing, which neither the proprietors nor the actors thought of till the audience caught at them’.⁵

Even before the curtain rose, audiences were typically partisan. Printed strips with alternative verses for the National Anthem, ‘God save the Queen’, were clandestinely strewn around Manchester theatres as early as February, four months before Caroline returned to England after seven colourful years on the continent.⁶ Renditions of a similar lyric at Bristol’s Theatre Royal caused havoc. At Brighton’s Theatre Royal, yards from George IV’s new palace, the Pavilion, the management abandoned the National Anthem altogether rather than risk nightly rioting. At Cambridge theatre there was a riot.⁷ York’s Theatre Royal was beset by ‘violent scenes whenever the musicians were called upon to play ... God Save the King and some other tunes’.⁸ Even at Bridgetown, Barbados, feelings ran so high that ‘in the Theatre in a Contest for singing “God save *the King*” or “*the Queen*” the parties came to blows’.⁹ A contemporary diarist recorded how in April he attended *King Lear* at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane. A farce, *The King and the Miller of Mansfield*, was performed after the main play:

The health of the King being drunk [on stage], a fellow cried out from the shilling gallery – “The Queen”. The allusion was caught up, and not a word was heard afterwards. The cries for the health of the Queen were uttered from all quarters ... not a syllable more of the farce was audible.¹⁰

The volatility of audiences was such that the new King stopped attending theatres altogether: the risks were simply too great, especially as the proceedings in the House of Lords drew to an end. When the case against Caroline collapsed on 11 November, the Theatre Royal Covent Garden company abandoned all attempt to complete the evening’s bill: ‘The result was complete submission to the will of the audience’ and the management ordered the orchestra repeatedly to play the National Anthem, its words of course amended to ‘God save the Queen’ by an audience who had all risen, ‘gentlemen waving their hats, and ladies their handkerchiefs’. At Drury Lane ‘not a note, even of the drum or trumpet, could be heard ... the majority of voices demanding “God save the Queen” to the tune of “God save the King”. Across the Thames, at the Coburg (London’s leading ‘illegitimate’ theatre) when the leading comedian gave three cheers for the Queen, it was

4 *Parliamentary Papers* 1831-32 (679): Report from the Select Committee on Dramatic Literature [hereafter SC Dramatic Literature], p. 219.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 225.

6 *Manchester Observer* 19 February 1820.

7 K. Barker, *The Theatre Royal Bristol, 1766-1966* (Salisbury: Compton, 1974), p. 98; C. Hibbert, *George IV: Regent and King* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), p. 156; *Courier* 16 October 1820.

8 S. Rosenfeld, *The York Theatre* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 2001), p. 210.

9 K. Cave (ed.), *The diary of Joseph Farington: Volume XVI, January 1820-December 1821* (London: Yale University Press, 1984), entry for 22 July 1821, p. 5704.

10 T. Sadler (ed.) *Diary, reminiscences, and correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson* (London: Macmillan, 1872), p. 161.

‘responded to nine times by the audience, in a voice of thunder! All the actors rushed upon stage, dressed and undressed’.¹¹

As news of the government’s failure to secure the King’s divorce spread, initially spontaneous celebrations gave way to carefully planned and elaborately choreographed processions, *tableaux vivants*, mock trials, and ritual burning of effigies in village and towns across Britain.¹² John Larpent, the Lord Chamberlain’s Examiner of Plays, was highly sensitive to the reverberations and tightened censorship on anything remotely political as the year drew to its close. For example on 28 November Drury Lane premiered an innocuous comedy *Justice; or, the caliph and the cobbler*; but when the management submitted the text for licence, Larpent struck through a passage which was a scarcely inflammatory re-hash of a standard trope about venial officeholders. The offensive words were those of a sinecurist: ‘I may fill my place though I know I’m not fit for it ... What I can’t do, I can get others to do for me – as long as I can do one thing [–] take the money’. The passage, Larpent explained, was ‘perhaps objectionable in the present times but not the common times’.¹³

Among the features of the Queen’s trial had been, first, a succession of foreign witnesses – mainly Italian – testifying to the Queen’s scandalous behaviour abroad, and second the daily arrival of a voluminous green bag in which prosecution evidence was stored. Green bags swiftly became a staple point of reference in street theatre (where their incineration stood in for the riskier incineration of effigies of the King or his ministers) and a plethora appeared elsewhere. Shelley incorporated an especially loathsome one into the properties required for his (unstaged) 1820 drama, *Swellfoot the Tyrant*.¹⁴ Almost a hundred graphic satires deployed a green bag as a central feature.¹⁵ Among them were scenes of St Stephen’s Theatre (i.e. Parliament) presenting ‘A new Italian farce called the Green Bag’ and ‘The Cauldron – Or Shakespeare Travestie’ in which a green bag stuffed with lies is emptied into the cauldron stirred by the three witches in the opening scene of *Macbeth*. The witches are depicted as Lord Liverpool and his Home and Foreign Secretaries. Into the cauldron they ‘mingle, / What shall make great Macbeth single, / Oath of an Italian slave ... Blood of Radicals and last, / In let the Divorce be cast’. *Macbeth* of course is played by George IV.¹⁶

Discussing the popular reactions to the royal divorce, historians typically reference this graphic material, along with journalistic sources, rather than the abundant pamphlet literature on the subject. Cartoons are seen as having an immediacy and demotic reach denied to more sober print forms. In a similar way David Mayer emphasizes how pantomime offered ‘immediate and specific comment’ on politicians, ‘celebrities’, and topical events of the day.¹⁷ But this capacity was not in any way limited to pantomime, nor to the so-called ‘illegitimate theatres’ that, by specializing in melodrama intercalated by musical interludes, evaded the controls exercised by the Lord Chamberlain over serious drama. Productions on the legitimate stage were also replete with political meanings. For example in October, at the height of the Caroline trial, Covent Garden presented

11 *Times* 11 November and *Observer* 13 November 1820; Joe Cowell, *Thirty years passed among the players in England and America* (New York: Harper, 1845), p. 48.

12 Chase, 1820, pp. 186-93.

13 Microfiche copy of Larpent’s annotated manuscript in British Library, Department of Manuscripts: MSS Sur F254/641. See also L. W. Conolly, *The censorship of English Drama, 1737-1824* (San Marino, Ca: Huntington Library, 1976), p. 112.

14 *Ædipus Tyrannus; or, Swellfoot the tyrant. A tragedy. In two acts. Translated from the original Doric* (London: Johnston, 1820); J. Mulhallen, *The Theatre of Shelley* (Cambridge: Open, 2010), p. 233.

15 British Museum, Department of Prints & Drawings [BMDPD], on-line catalogue (accessed 10 August 2013).

16 ‘A new Italian farce called the Green Bag by Permission’ (Fores, 22 July 1820) and ‘The Cauldron – or Shakespeare Travestie’ (Fairburn, August 1820), BMDPD catalogue numbers 1975,0621.17 and 1948,0214.817.

17 David Mayer, *Harlequin in his element: the English pantomime, 1806-1836* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard UP, 1969), p. 2.

Cymbeline with the actor William Macready, then on the cusp of his career as one of the century's great tragedians, playing Iachimo. Shakespeare's drama of a chaste, British princess (Imogen), the victim of a vengeful husband, turns on malicious claims by the Italian, Iachimo, that he had 'tasted her in bed'. At the dénouement of the play, Iachimo is tricked into publicly admitting his duplicity. What the audience has known all along – that the purity of the princess is unassailable – is revealed at last to her husband and the whole royal court.

In his autobiography Macready glossed over the production, saying merely that 'to Iachimo I gave no prominence'. But the play's reception in the London press suggests the very opposite. Macready's 'Iachimo has all the disbelief in principle that belongs to real vice', thought the *Examiner*, and 'the audience do not fail to apply the prominent passages about the calumniated princess and "false Italians"'. One passage of the play relating to the exposure of 'bed chamber evidence received three distinct rounds of applause'. *The Times* reported that when a minor character, Pisanio, suggested to Imogen's husband that the supposed evidence of her infidelity had either been accidentally dropped or stolen from her, the actor was rewarded by several minutes of 'the most vehement applause'. Audience approbation reached a climax in response to Iachimo's penitential speech in the final act: 'The heaviness of my guilt within my bosom / Takes off my manhood. I have belied a lady, / The Princess of this country'.

The loyalist *Morning Post* called for the play's cancellation because of 'the manner in which certain passages' had been acclaimed 'by the Radical part of the audience ... we do not think that in times of public agitation, the source of our amusements should be poisoned, and that profit should be sought at the risk of public discord'.¹⁸ If the audience needed a cue for its tumultuous response, one could be found in *Non Mi Ricordo*, William Hone and George Cruikshank's pro-Caroline pamphlet, which went through thirty-one editions in four months. Its title page is headed by Iachimo's words as he steals a bracelet (to act as proof of their adultery) from the sleeping Imogen: 'this will witness outwardly, as strongly as the conscience does within'.¹⁹ *Non Mi Ricordo* referenced the repeated response ('I don't remember') under cross examination of one of the most controversial Italian witnesses in the divorce proceedings. The loyalist press retaliated by using another quotation from *Cymbeline* in a sardonic allusion to Caroline's spurious purity: 'As chaste as unsoiled snow'.²⁰

Cymbeline was not the only Shakespeare play to resonate with popular politics in 1820.²¹ Every passage of *Othello* 'that could be deemed illustrative' of Caroline's persecution was seized on and loudly applauded, to the embarrassment of Drury Lane's usually dutiful management.²² Other managers deliberately exploited contemporary resonances. Productions of the Shakespeare/Fletcher history play *Henry VIII* gave particular prominence to the trial of Queen Katherine. *Henry VIII, or, the Fall of Cardinal Wolsey* as it was invariably titled in 1820, had long been noted for its sympathetic portrayal of a dignified and wrongly accused Queen Katherine. The playwrights' less than sympathetic treatment of her husband was tempered by the unmistakable implication that Wolsey was ultimately to blame for the Queen's persecution. This resonated with the recurring

18 *Examiner* 22 October, *Times* 19 October, *Morning Post* 19 and 22 October 1820.

19 *Non Mi Ricordo, &c. &c. &c.* (London: Hone, 1820).

20 E.g. *Courier* 14 November 1820, *John Bull* 11 February 1821.

21 On this theme in the Victorian period see A. Taylor, 'Shakespeare and radicalism: the uses and abuses of Shakespeare in nineteenth-century popular politics', *Historical Journal* 45: 2 (2009), pp. 367-79.

22 *Times* 9 November 1820; see also E. A. Smith *A queen on trial: the affair of Queen Caroline* (Stroud: Sutton, 1993), pp. 138-9.

trope in contemporary commentary of a monarch misled by corrupt ministers. The popularity of *Henry VIII* also derived from ‘The Trial of Queen Katherine’ being one of its central scenes, eminently suited for presentation as a set-piece spectacle and flagged on playbills as among its chief attractions.²³ Cruikshank also referenced the play in his satirical print ‘the new FARCE – as performed at the Royalty Theatre’, with George IV inevitably shown in the title role.²⁴

It is important, however, not to let the royal divorce over-determine our understanding of 1820. There is abundant evidence beyond the royal divorce plays, *Cymbeline* and *Henry VIII*, to suggest quickening theatrical engagement in the themes of liberty and freedom and resistance to the assaults of tyranny and privilege. The notorious Six Acts were particularly intended to suppress what loyalists routinely termed the seditious and blasphemous press; it is for that, and the creation of the unstamped press in response, that they are chiefly remembered. It is worth emphasising, therefore, that the Acts also rendered illegal any meeting, indoors or out, that discussed politics unless it had been formally constituted by a requisition of ratepayers to the lord lieutenant of a county or mayor of a corporation.

However, the Six Acts left theatres untouched. It is here, with productions entering into dynamic dialogue with contemporary politics, that the greatest significance of the stage in 1820 resides. Sometimes this dialogue was explicit and intentional as in the Coburg’s *Giovanni in the Country! or, the Rake Husband* which included a version of *La Marseillaise* and the depiction of a parliamentary election culminating with women presenting a Cap of Liberty to the victor.²⁵ Sometimes it was subtler but no-less powerful. At Leeds, for example, *Julius Caesar* was presented in June ‘for the first time these thirty years’.²⁶ The production at York’s Theatre Royal was the first in the city since 1813.²⁷ These revivals are consistent with a renewed interest in the play that had begun in Manchester a few weeks after Peterloo. While *Julius Caesar* is an ambiguous meditation on the conflict of tyranny and freedom, it was a common point of reference in discussion about the justice of resisting tyranny. ‘Brutus and Cassius were lauded to the very skies for slaying Caesar’, the leader of the Cato Street conspiracy declared in a speech from the dock before sentencing, going on to deplore that the soil beneath which he would be buried ‘should be a theatre for slaves, for cowards, for despots’.²⁸

Less ambiguous in its depiction of the descent into tyranny was *Coriolanus*. This was the more-popular of Shakespeare’s Roman plays. Nationally there were at least three times as many productions in 1819-20 as there had been the previous season, while two separate printed editions of the play were also published.²⁹ Exploiting the momentary feminisation of public politics wrought by the popular campaign to support Caroline, advertising fore-grounded the part of the leading women (consistently a source of good sense and moral probity) in the play. But there were other reasons why *Coriolanus* struck a raw nerve with the authorities after

23 Theatre Royal Hull, playbill for 15 December in University of York, Borthwick Institute, Raymond Burton Collection 29/20; Leeds Central Library, Local Studies Library, playbills collection, Leeds Theatre 13 June 1821.

24 ‘A Scene in the new FARCE – as performed at the Royalty Theatre!’ (Cruikshank, 14 February 1821), BMDPD catalogue number 1862,1217.392.

25 D. Worrall, *Theatric revolution: drama, censorship, and romantic period subcultures 1773-1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 206-7. Worrall suggests the play ‘was almost certainly intended to create an allusion to the philandering Prince of Wales’.

26 Leeds Central Library, Local Studies Library, playbills collection, Leeds Theatre 30 June 1820.

27 Rosenfeld, *York Theatre*, p. 209.

28 G. T. Wilkinson, *An authentic history of the Cato Street conspiracy*, 2nd edn, (London: Kelly, 1820), p. 338.

29 *Shakspeare's Coriolanus ... From the prompt copy of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane* (London: Tabby, 1820); Oxberry’s *New English Drama*, No. 39, *Coriolanus: or, The Roman matron, a tragedy* (London: Simpkin & Marshall, 1820).

Peterloo. It may have struck a raw nerve before it, but there appears to have been no performance of the play during 1819 until 29 November when Covent Garden presented it, with Macready in the lead. Drury Lane quickly followed suit with a double bill that paired *Coriolanus* with the pantomime *Jack and the Beanstalk; or, Harlequin and the Ogre*. *Coriolanus* was in repertory at Drury Lane until the end of January and the pantomime until April.

Jack and the Beanstalk was itself replete with radical overtones: one of the most revolutionary periodicals of the war years had been *Giant Killer* while Hone and Cruikshank's *The House that Jack Built* was one of the best selling political satires of the Regency period. The title was used by London's Olympic Theatre for its winter season pantomime. Its managers had some difficulty getting the play past Larpent on account of the anti-clerical content of the version submitted for examination. Larpent passed a revised version only three days before the premiere, insisting on the anodyne recasting of a venial parson and parish clerk into a doctor and his assistant.³⁰

To return, however, to *Coriolanus*. Theatres staging the play during 1820 included Bath, Brighton, Bristol, Doncaster, Dublin, Hull, Leeds, Liverpool, Sheffield, Wakefield and York. Of these provincial productions little is known, but the capital's theatres royal hit an extraordinary problem in January 1820 when the Larpent prohibited them from staging *Coriolanus* 'until the popular passages, most in favour of liberty, shall have been expunged'.³¹ Something of the official dilemma concerning *Coriolanus* becomes apparent when one considers Cruikshank's depiction of George IV in the character of Coriolanus addressing the London plebs, in a caricature issued barely a month after his accession.³² The populace wear caps of liberty and carry banners such as 'Burdett and Reform', 'Revolution and Plunder' and 'Liberty of the Press'. At first glance this is a sympathetic representation of the man who – as regent and monarch – Cruikshank otherwise pilloried mercilessly as obese and debauched. But the very act of depicting the monarch as Coriolanus at all was hugely ambiguous, especially in the very week after the exposure of Cato Street. The viewer of this portrait could be expected to know that Coriolanus was a deeply flawed character, whose contempt for liberty in pursuit of his own aggrandisement would soon cost him his life. Cruikshank knew this, of course, and in case of doubt inserted himself into the picture, clutching a folio labelled 'Caricature'. In front of him stands his collaborator William Hone, grasping a club labelled 'House that Jack Built' and 'Man in the Moon' (another of the pair's popular assaults upon George and his ministers).

However loyal the protestations of theatre managers, however heavily censored the script, it would surely have been impossible to see *Coriolanus* innocently in 1820, even without Cruickshank's graphic prompting. And of course, the act of representing tyrannicide on stage was itself daring. Even the representation of the violent death of wholly innocent royalty courted prosecution. On 27 December 1819 the Coburg, south London's leading 'illegitimate' theatre, staged a daring production of *Richard the Third*. It was daring both because it infringed the legal stipulation that unlicensed theatres could not present serious drama except in excerpts interspersed with music, and because it very explicitly depicted what the playbill proclaimed in

30 'The House that Jack Built': microfiche copy of manuscript in British Library, Department of Manuscripts, MSS Sur F254/657. On the politics of *Jack and the Beanstalk* pantomimes see Mayer, *Harlequin* pp. 61-2, 64, 91, 197, 203, 242-4, 370, 372-3.

31 *Hampshire Telegraph* 24 January 1820.

32 G. Cruikshank, 'Coriolanus Addressing the Plebeians', 29 February 1820, BMDPD catalogue number 1859,0316.152); J. Bate, *Shakespearean constitutions: politics, theatre, criticism, 1730-1830* (Oxford: OUP, 1989), pp. 102-3.

advance as ‘the Assassination of the Prince of Wales and the Duke of York’ in the Tower. Shakespeare, of course, carefully located their murders offstage; the Coburg was teasing its audience with a veiled allusion to the Prince Regent and his eldest brother, the commander in chief of the British army.³³

For presenting this production, the Coburg’s owner was found guilty the following year in a prosecution initiated by the Drury Lane management in defence of its royal patent.³⁴ Though they too exploited popular interest in *Coriolanus* following its success at Covent Garden, Drury Lane’s managers were considerably more politically cautious and ostentatiously loyalist than Covent Garden’s. This loyalism was rewarded in February 1821 when the King conspicuously chose Drury Lane to resume his patronage of the stage.³⁵

The experience of London’s patent theatres in mounting *Coriolanus* in January 1820 suggests the revival of established dramas needs closer investigation. The activities of the Lord Chamberlain are usually viewed only with reference to new drama, a bias that derives from the nature of the surviving records: the Examiner’s annotated copies of the texts submitted for approval. The extent of voluntary censorship can only be guessed at, especially in provincial houses, as nervous managers bowdlerised dramas rather than risk performing potentially contentious passages. This consideration clearly prevailed at York in March, when Gay’s *Beggars’ Opera* was judged ‘too tough for the times, and objectionable scenes’ were excised.³⁶ There was an element of risk in such self-censorship for, as the Coburg’s proprietor argued, ‘political allusions’ were ‘so much more popular to the frequenters of the theatre than any licentiousness’.³⁷

Two other revivals especially encountered problems in 1820, *Brutus* and *Venice Preserved*. William Duncombe’s *Lucius Junius Brutus* had first been produced in 1735, based on Voltaire’s work of the same name. Brutus, first consul of Rome (not to be confused with Caesar’s assassin) leads the Romans in the struggle against the Tarquins. Duncombe, a Whig, peppered his play with encomia to liberty and invocations to resist tyranny:

[T]he Laws and Rights, of which we are the Guardians,
 Restrain our Hands from Arbitrary Sway.
 T’arrest a *Roman* upon bare Surmise,
 Would be to act like that outrageous Tyrant
 Whom we renounce, and take up Arms t’expell.
 Mean while, let us go forth to rouze the Slothful,
 To chear the Weak, to animate the virtuous,
 And terrify the Sons of Violence.³⁸

33 British Library Playbills, Royal Coburg, 27 December 1819; *Theatrical inquisitor, and monthly mirror*, vol. 16 (Feb 1820), pp. 84-94.

34 SC Dramatic Literature, evidence of Davidge, p. 76; see also Worrall, *Theatric revolution*, pp. 119, 202, 213-4, and J. Moody, *Illegitimate theatre in London, 1770-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 119.

35 *Morning Post* 7 Feb 1821. Significantly George chose to attend Arne’s opera *Artaxerxes*. Artaxerxes, King of Persia, succeeds his assassinated father and, just as he is swearing to maintain his subjects’ rights, almost dies himself at the same assassin’s hand. He graciously remits the death penalty for this treachery.

36 Rosenfeld, *York Theatre*, p. 209.

37 SC Dramatic Literature, evidence of George Bolwell Davidge, p. 85.

38 William Duncombe, *Lucius Junius Brutus* (1735).

Competing with Duncombe's drama was John Howard Payne's strongly derivative *Brutus, or the fall of Tarquin*, premiered in 1818.³⁹ Payne's reworking accentuated the theme of Roman greatness having been achieved under enlightened rule. This was a popular idea with audiences. Playbills for Payne's play on the Stafford circuit declaimed how Brutus roused 'the People to break their chains of Slavery, and expel the Tarquins; which laid the foundation of Roman greatness and eventually made them MASTERS OF THE WORLD'.⁴⁰ Voltaire supposedly observed that Brutus was 'the subject, perhaps, of all others, the most fitted for the English stage'. To this the Tory *Quarterly Review* retorted: 'it certainly seems to us objectionable in an eminent degree, and for many reasons'.⁴¹ Chief of these was that it was 'too strictly political'. In Shakespeare's English history plays, 'it is not on public revolutions, a discontented people, or rival factions, that he suffers us to dwell', claimed the *Quarterly*. However, his Roman plays could not be exempted from this criticism, while imitative works such as *Brutus* decidedly offended. Pointedly, the *Quarterly* reviewed *Brutus* along with a drama premiered in 1819, *Evadne*, by the prominent agitator for Roman Catholic emancipation, Richard Lalor Shiel. *Evadne* centres on the King of Naples, 'of good dispositions, but corrupted by pleasure', and on Ludovico, a treacherous courtier. It concludes with Ludovico's assassination at the hands of a high-minded Neapolitan patriot. The *Quarterly's* assault on *Evadne* preceded the revolution in the Kingdom of Naples, but its message was clear even without that added contemporary resonance. Despite its popularity in 1819, no London house presented it in 1820. It was, however, performed at Liverpool and on the York circuit until news of the Neapolitan revolution appears to have prompted its judicious withdrawal.⁴²

Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved* (first staged in 1682) fared rather better. Subject of only a single private production in 1819,⁴³ Drury Lane's 1820 revival saw it in repertory for over three months, though the supposition must be that it appeared with passages such as this one cut:

I am a villain ... To see our senators
 Cheat the deluded people with a show
 Of liberty, which yet they ne'er must taste of.
 They say, by them our hands are free from fetters;
 Yet whom they please they lay in basest bonds;
 Bring whom they please to infamy and sorrow;
 Drive us, like wrecks, down the rough tide of power,
 Whilst no hold's left to save us from destruction.
 All that bear this are villains, and I one,

³⁹ *British Stage and Literary Cabinet*, vol. 3 (February 1819) pp.40-3.

⁴⁰ British Library, Playbills Collection vol. 306, Drayton (24 May); see also vol. 264, part 1, Stafford (3 December 1819).

⁴¹ *Quarterly review* 22: 44 (Jan 1820), 402-15 (p. 404). See also 'Vindex', 'Mr Howard Payne and the Quarterly Reviewers', *Theatrical Inquisitor*, 16:93 (March 1820) pp.128-34 for an attack on the *Quarterly's* criticism of *Brutus*.

⁴² *Liverpool Mercury* 30 June 1820; cf letter to the (Liverpool) *Kaleidoscope* 22 (November 1820), p. 176, arguing for the revival of either *Virginius*, *Tamburlaine* or, 'the most judicious tragedy to select', *Evadne*; York Minster Library, Playbills Collection, LT[A] 1820-08-YOR, 8 March 1820.

⁴³ In September 1819 a comic travesty was presented at the Wilson Street Private Theatre, London, see *Theatre; or, dramatic and literary mirror*, 2 October 1819.

Not to rise up at the great call of nature,
 And check the growth of these domestic spoilers,
 That make us slaves, and tell us, 'tis our charter.⁴⁴

Venice Preserved was also revived in March for the York circuit, and so also played at Hull, Sheffield, Wakefield and Doncaster. It was yet another drama that centred on conspiracy and betrayal. Although the republic of Venice is preserved, those who conspire against it are given the best speeches and all of them die noble deaths. Ever since the French Revolution, *Venice Preserved* had been a controversial work. Elizabeth Inchbald, in her preface to it in her *British Theatre* (1808), remarked that it 'is played repeatedly, except when an order from the Lord Chamberlain forbids its representation, lest some of the speeches ... should be applied, by the ignorant part of the audience, to certain men, or assemblies, in the English state'.⁴⁵ When John Thelwall was tried for treason in 1793, one of the charges against him specified the uproar he had caused at Drury Lane by loudly applauding this passage in Otway's play:

We've neither safety, unity, nor peace, for the foundation's lost of common good; justice is lame, as well as blind amongst us; the Laws (corrupted to the ends that make 'em) serve but for instruments of some new tyranny.

Two years later *The Times* commented on how the drama 'feed[s] the flame of lurking sedition'.⁴⁶ 'Who will dispute that the Tragedy of Venice Preserved was not prudentially suspended, in times of the greatest ferment?', demanded the Examiner of Plays, defending the periodic suppression of the play in 1829.⁴⁷ Alongside Godwin, Paine and Rousseau, the play was quoted in one of the most cogent arguments for universal suffrage published in 1820, *The Rights of the People*, issued by the exuberantly irreverent William Benbow. Several copies of *Rights of the people* exist in Home Office papers, for the government seriously considered it for prosecution. It is an extraordinary collision of philosophical and polemical texts, prose, drama and poetry, published in wrappers that detailed Spain's revolutionary constitution and advertised Benbow's scurrilous pro-Caroline publications. Among these was the memorably titled *Lucretia and Runjumdildopunt*, 'as not performed at the Theatres Royal, Drury Lane and Covent Garden; it being thought likely that the Lord Chamberlain would refuse his licence'. Predictably George IV is *Runjumdildopunt*, but innuendo alternates with political allusion, to Burke's infamous notion of the 'swinish multitude' for example.⁴⁸

Shelley's *Swellfoot the Tyrant* similarly cast the gouty monarch in a title role and cast swine as the defenders of Caroline. Another Benbow publication, *The Queen and the Mogul ... as performed at a Theatre-Royal*, depicted an obese George quoting *Hamlet* ('Oh that this too, too solid flesh would melt'). Its title page

44 SC Dramatic Literature, evidence of James Kenney, p. 229, specified only two dramas 'that have been licensed [but] have been suspended in times of excitement'. *Venice Preserved* was one, *King Lear* the other, during the period of George IV's insanity.

45 E. Inchbald, 'Venice Preserved', p. 3, in *The British Theatre: Or, a Collection of Plays*, vol. 12 (London: Longman, 1808).

46 *Times* 27 October 1795; Moody, *Illegitimate theatre*, p. 48n1.

47 George Colman, *Observations on the notice of a motion to rescind certain powers of His Majesty's Lord Chamberlain* (privately printed, 1829), p. 3.

48 *Lucretia and Runjumdildopunt; or, John Bull in search of the pathetic. A serious musical farce, in three acts* (London: Benbow, 1820), title page, p. 16.

quoted the same passage from *Venice Preserved* that had so enraptured Thelwall.⁴⁹ This juxtaposition is itself further evidence for the creative collision of the high-minded and the scurrilous, and drama with the graphic and the printed word, which makes such productions so difficult to pin down and categorise. Street literature might blaze dramatic quotations beneath a title, or be presented as a play on the printed page. *Swellfoot, The Queen and the Mogul, Lucretia and Runjumdildopunt* and other 'plays' such as *The Green Bag* were written for the theatre of the reader's imagination rather than the stage.⁵⁰ It is a challenge for us to understand what the conditions of reception were for such pseudo-dramas. Histories of the theatre are inevitably stage-struck, being largely confined to formal performance. However, newspapers were read aloud in pubs, at political meetings and workplaces; 'free and easies' blurred the boundary between sociability and performance; and there was a whole world of popular amateur dramatics of which (in contrast to 'polite' domestic theatricals) we know nothing.⁵¹ It is most unlikely that publications like these were consumed through the act of silent reading alone. There is seldom a clear boundary between reading and performance. In the pro-Caroline literature of 1820 there was barely a boundary at all.

However, we have also seen that theatrical performances created meanings that were dormant or even unintended in the texts they played. 'It is not by quotation that a play of this sort can fairly be understood', one critic observed of *Virginus*, the most-sensational of all the premieres of 1820. 'It depends much, and purposely we have no doubt, upon the aid of representation'.⁵² *Virginus, or the Fall of the Decemviri*, was the work of the Irish playwright James Sheridan Knowles, whose father was cousin to the outspoken Whig dramatist Richard Sheridan. Premiered at Glasgow, where the author was a teacher, in March 1820 *Virginus* was then revised for Covent Garden in May. Later in 1820 it was presented at Bristol, Dublin, Edinburgh and Newcastle. Drury Lane also mounted a feeble rival.⁵³ The context in which this depiction 'of love – of bitter wrong/ Of freedom – of sad pity – and lust of pow'r' was first staged rendered it hugely controversial.⁵⁴ The Decemviri was a commission of ten patricians who ruled Rome who, when their term of office expired in 459 BC, refused to stand down. Knowles depicts the Decemvirate as debauched and corrupt. Unlike the heroes of the other Roman plays in vogue in 1820, *Virginus* was a common citizen – a point of some significance for audiences in 1820. A soldier serving away from Rome, he leaves his teenage daughter Virginia in the care of a nurse. The chief of the Decemviri, Appius Claudius, seized by unbridled lust for Virginia, kidnaps her and when she repels his advances initiates rigged court proceedings to have her declared the fatherless slave of one of his cronies. Virginia and her supporters are powerless to influence the outcome. At the play's climax *Virginus*, unexpectedly returned from war, stabs Virginia through the heart as she lies in his arms, rather than see her fall victim to the lust of Appius.

49 *The Queen and the Mogul: a play in two acts* (London: Benbow, 1820), frontispiece and title page.

50 *The Green Bag, a farce. As now performing with great applause by His Majesty's servants. In two acts* (London: Onwhyn, 1820).

51 See C. Thomson, *The autobiography of an artisan* (Nottingham: Shaw, 1847), pp. 102-7, for young workers' theatricals in Hull around this time.

52 *Theatrical Inquisitor* 16 (October 1820), p. 303.

53 It lasted three performances (29 May-1 June). See *European Magazine & London Review*, 77 (June 1820), pp. 531-2; *Theatrical inquisitor* 16 (June 1820), pp. 392-3; surviving poster in the V&A Edison collection.

54 *The dramatic works of James Sheridan Knowles* (London: Routledge, [1884?]), epilogue to *Virginus*, p. 111. These lines are omitted from the first edition: J. S. Knowles, *Virginus: a tragedy, in five acts* (London: Ridgway, 1820).

Thus abridged, *Virginius* has perhaps only passing resonance with politics in late Regency Britain. But from its inception, audiences seem to have interpreted it contemporary terms. One critic mused:

In what consists the interest and force of [t]his popular play of “Virginius”? The domestic feeling. The costume, the setting, the decorations are heroic. We have Roman tunics, but a modern English heart, – the scene is the Forum, but the sentiments those of the “Bedford Arms”.⁵⁵

It mattered not that it needed a well-informed audience to know that *Virginius* had a basis in fact and that there had been a popular revolt against the Decumvirate and the restitution of constitutional rule. Knowles’s depiction of debauchery and despotism in the highest realm of the empire, melded to a tale of persecuted innocence, was a potent drama and the title role drew from Macready a powerful, self-defining performance.⁵⁶ Not only was Appius depicted on stage as shamelessly dismissive of all legal propriety or conventional morality, the Roman plebs were thrust into the action of the play to an extent without parallel, even in an age that relished spectacular crowd scenes in its drama. One review indeed complained about ‘the frequent introduction of the populace on the stage’.⁵⁷ One of the functions of this crowd is to offer increasingly vocal dissent at the court hearing, as Appius claims repeatedly, ‘The law is just – most reasonable – I framed that law myself – I will maintain that law’.⁵⁸

In a preface to the play, James Sheridan Knowles related that he wrote it in great haste: ‘it was resolved and executed in about three months’.⁵⁹ Those three months included the fall-out from Peterloo, Parliament’s passing of the Six Acts and Cato Street. Its premiere then preceded the Easter rising in Scotland by only a few days.⁶⁰ The Lord Chamberlain’s Examiner passed *Virginius* for performance on 9 May.⁶¹ However according to Macready, on the eve of its London premiere a week later, the script was requested by ‘Carlton House’ (George IV’s London residence). It was returned the next morning with several deletions of lines in which Appius Claudius lauded tyranny.⁶² It is possible that whatever lines offended Carlton House were permanently excised from all renditions, on stage or in print. Alternatively, they may have been a soliloquy that concludes, ‘at our feet array / The wealth, and power, and dignity of Rome / In absolute subjection! Tyranny! / How godlike is thy port!’⁶³

Conolly’s history of English stage censorship casts doubt on Macready’s claim, citing the lack of evidence for it in Larpent’s copy. Macready, however, makes clear the play had already passed the Examiner, and that it was the text as approved that was supplied for ‘royal approval’. Newspapers also reported rumours that, having ‘passed the ordeal of the Lord Chamberlain’s Office, the manuscript was demanded for inspection

55 R. H. Horne (ed.), *A new spirit of the age* (London: Smith, 1844), vol. 2, pp. 86-7.

56 See for example the review in *Theatrical inquisitor*, vol. 16 (May 1820), p. 324. Macready in the character of Virginius is one of only four illustrations in *Macready’s reminiscences and selections from his diaries and letters*, ed. F. Pollock (London: Macmillan, 1876).

57 *Mirror of Fashion* 18 May 1820.

58 Knowles, *Virginius*, p. 45.

59 *Idem*, p. 4.

60 *Glasgow Herald* 27 March 1820.

61 Microfiche copy of manuscript in British Library, Department of Manuscripts: MSS Sur F254/764.

62 *Macready’s Reminiscences*, p. 159.

63 Knowles, *Virginius*, p. 29.

in a high quarter'.⁶⁴ It may also be significant that the originally contracted publisher declined to publish the text. Macready clearly wanted his reader to believe last-minute censorship was the personal intervention of the monarch. This ultimately unverifiable claim should not distract us from the more important general point that theatres in 1820 offered abundant 'immediate and specific comment' on the politics of the day, and that this function was limited neither to pantomime nor illegitimate theatres.

It was specifically *Virginus* that prompted Hazlitt's outburst:

In the printed play, we observe a number of passages marked with inverted commas, which are omitted in the representation. This is the case almost uniformly wherever the words "Tyranny", or "Liberty", occur. Is this done by authority, or is it prudence in the author, "lest the courtiers offended should be?" Is the name of Liberty to be struck out of the English language, and are we not to hate tyrants even in an old Roman play?⁶⁵

Productions detailed in this discussion of politics and performance in 1820 have been limited to those with documented contemporary political resonance. It has avoided speculation about plays whose titles suggest political content but about which evidence is unavailable. We can only guess at the reception of Beverley theatre's *The curfew, or the Norman banditti*, its title hinting at the long-established radical trope of the Norman Yoke.⁶⁶ How did Dibdin's comic opera *The Cabinet* go down in the Suffolk market town of Bungay?⁶⁷ *The School of Reform; or, how to rule a husband* in Durham?⁶⁸ And how did Barnstable audiences perceive Carline [sic], heroine of *The Young Hussar; or, Love and Mercy*?⁶⁹

Context is all, and the context in which the stage operated in 1820 was extraordinary. Many histories do little more than note that, following the death of George III, it was once again possible to stage *King Lear*. But this is almost the least interesting thing about theatrical performances in 1820. The revival of interest in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, *Cymbeline*, *Henry VIII* and *Julius Caesar*, the tumultuous audience reception of those plays, and of others no-longer familiar to us, such as *Lucius Junius Brutus* and *Venice Preserved*, and the controversies surrounding the new dramas *Evadne* and, especially, *Virginus* – all these point to a heightened awareness among managers and audiences of the radical potentiality of the stage, at a time when the more-conventional political media of newspapers and public meetings were being savagely curtailed. It is not without irony that this potentiality was realised in a context of State censorship. Events in 1820 reveal just how fallacious is the conventional (and still current) view that state censorship 'was remarkably effective in stifling any expression of political criticism on the London stage'.⁷⁰

64 *Glasgow Herald* 22 May 1820; *Morning Herald* 19 May 1820, quoted in Conolly, pp. 109-10.

65 W. Hazlitt, 'The Drama', *London Magazine*, vol. 2, (July 1820), p. 91, reprinted in *The complete works of William Hazlitt: centenary edition*, ed. P. P. Howe (London, Dent, 1933), vol. 18, pp. 347-8.

66 T. Sheppard, *Evolution of the drama in Hull and district* ((Hill: Brown, 1927), p. 161.

67 Bungay Local History Museum: Bungay Theatre Playbill, 17 April 1820.

68 *Durham Chronicle* 29 July 1820.

69 Exeter, Devon Heritage Centre: Barnstaple Playbills collection, 10 November 1820.

70 D. Thomas, D. Carlton and A. Etienne, *Theatre censorship: from Walpole to Wilson* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 47. For detailed rebuttals of this convention see especially Moody, *Illegitimate theatre* and Worrall, *Theatrical revolution*.