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Hybridism, Visual Culture and the Pedagogy of Romantic Drama and Theatre

Abstract

This essay discusses the potentialities of diverse tools and approaches to teaching students about theatrical culture during the Romantic period, with a close focus on the enthralling field of the illegitimate, and also embracing stage music and theatre-related print culture. The function of playbills as mediators advertising theatrical spectacles, pantomimes, and performances of all sorts is explored, as graphically emerging in late-Romantic visual culture. The current and lively debate on the pedagogy of Romanticism, to which the essay intends to contribute, has been running parallel to the ongoing redefinition process investing the entire disciplinary field of Romantic studies. This reshaping of Romantic pedagogy mirrors the "changing canon" (Higgins and Ruston 2010), and records the transformation by focusing on a number of key aspects, including genre, with theatre playing a central role.

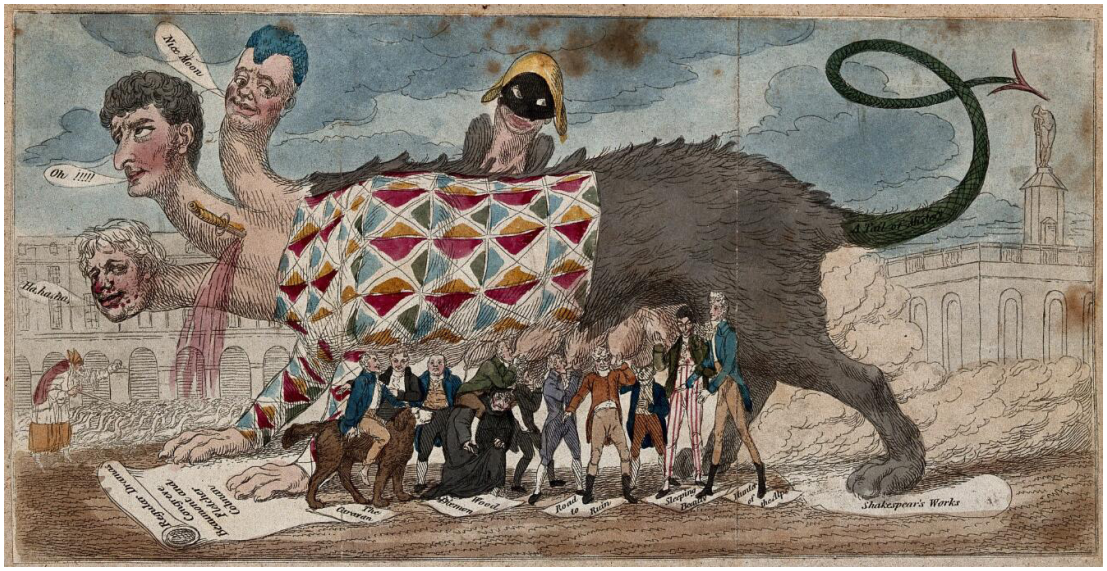
1. *Introduction*

This essay sets out to discuss some aspects in the dynamic exchange of current research and teaching practices in Romanticism. Foregrounding the dimension of historicity has been central to the ongoing process of redefinition that invests the disciplinary field of Romantic studies as a whole. The current pluralization of that traditionally uncountable noun – Romanticisms – has made it a viable catchword for a continuing process, aiming at "re-historicizing Romantic literature," as Michael Bradshaw effectively put it (2019, 1). Present-day dynamic and historically nuanced research practice has invited a shift in focus from the centre to margins in many different ways. This move is significantly mirrored in the reshaping of the very pedagogy of Romanticism, where genre provides a productive entry point, and theatre, a significant case study, to the extent that, as Thomas Crochunis observed, it exemplifies "the pedagogical and curricular re-evaluation of the Romantic era

and of British theatre history that face us in response to recent scholarly work on Romantic theatre and drama" (2010, 24). In what follows, I test in particular the case of illegitimate theatre, which, by its very nature, lends itself ideally to reconsidering with students "how we read historically situated texts" (Crochunis 2010, 25).

2. *Hybridism as Illegitimate Imprint*

By designating a complex, multifaceted set of phenomena, the notion of illegitimate theatre incorporates the nexus of institutional, political, and generic conditions occurring at the specific historical contingency of the decades between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The emergence of "illegitimate" and increasingly competitive minor theatres was central to a profound mutation in British theatrical culture during the late Georgian period. The conflict between London's "legitimate" patent playhouses – Covent Garden and Drury Lane, with the addition of the Haymarket for the summer season – and the rising "illegitimate", i.e., unlicensed, theatres accounts not only for the institutional intricacies marking that phase in British theatre history, but also for the "proliferation" of dramatic forms and genres at that time (Cox and Gamer 2003, xviii), which illustrates the essentially hybrid quality of Romantic-era theatrical culture. This is captured by a satirical print, dated 4th December, 1807, which appeared in *The Satirist* for January 1808, and is known as The Monster Melo-drame.



A monster representing the miscegenated state of the theatre, combining tragedy, comedy, and pantomime. Coloured etching by S. De Wilde, 1807, after "Sylvester Scrutiny". Wellcome Collection. Public Domain Mark

The print offers a complex and multi-layered satirical commentary on current theatrical culture, including writing conventions, production management and performance practices.[1] Against the silhouettes of the two licensed theatres, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, a many-headed beast – half human, half animal, both male and female – stands in the foreground, sporting a pantomime motley costume, while numerous playwrights are swarming around and suckle from it. The beast tramples Shakespeare's works, as well as the names of the English "regular" playwriting tradition – Congreve, Beaumont and Fletcher, Colman the Elder. Its various heads, as a kind of monstrous hydra, feature playwright and Drury Lane manager Richard Brinsley Sheridan, a theatrically dying John Philip Kemble, and clown Joseph Grimaldi reciting his recurring line "Nice Moon", while Harlequin incongruously sprouts up from the back of the beast. As Mayer and Gamer note, the print captures "a moment of radical uncertainty both on and off stage" (Mayer and Gamer 2021, 125), performing a drastic critique of the current state of the London stage, in which the tradition of regular drama was perceived to be under attack. The prohibition against minor theatres performing tragedy and comedy – the forms of spoken drama that were the domain of legitimate theatres, and subject to the action of institutionalized censorship – triggered the propagation of alternative forms of spectacle, in which the formal absence of the spoken word would be made up for through a variety of circumventing maneuvers, and where the power of the visual dominated.[2]

As Jane Moody observed, approaching illegitimate theatrical culture entails summoning a world "populated with hack playwrights and dramatic spies," no less than "lords, sailors and Whitechapel butchers":

> As we enter this world, we discover playhouses magnificently decorated in gilt and rich velvet, and glimpse a stage displaying oriental palaces and naval victories, urban blackguardism and sensational crimes. [We discover] the wonderful excitement of theatregoing in early nineteenth-century London: the hyperbolic typography of playbills hurriedly posted on walls or jostling for space in shop windows; the sight of the Surrey Theatre, brilliantly lit up

1 Cf. Moody 2000, 55-6; Cox and Gamer 2003, x. A recent, extensive discussion of the print and its context is given in Mayer and Gamer 2021.

2 The restriction was in force until the 1843 Theatre Regulation Act. See Moody 2000 for a full discussion of the symmetric "invention" of illegitimate culture and "disintegration" of legitimate theatre. A concise account is given in Moody 2004, 199-215.

> on the south bank, to celebrate the one-hundredth performance of Black-Ey'd Susan; the expectant crush of carriages, apprentices and placard-waving protestors around the Adelphi at Moncrieff's Tom and Jerry. (Moody 2000, 1)

This description opens Moody's foundational book, Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770-1840 – a source of knowledge and pleasure for scholars which has shaped contemporary research and will continue to influence the field of Romantic-era theatre studies.[3] The book also offers a potentially inexhaustible guide for those who teach Romantic-period drama. Her words conjure up an entire world before our minds' eyes – London's teeming theatrical life, with its sundry sounds and colors, the tactile sensations, the buzz of real people and the roars of fictional wars; the vivid lighting of playhouses and the darkness of the London underworld; all evoking what effectively was – what must have been – a multi-sensorial experience. The complex of phenomena under examination demands that a class on illegitimate theatre necessarily take account of and lay emphasis on the multifaceted traits of performance, as well as, in the words of Elizabeth Fay, "the material conditions of playwriting, acting, and even attending theatres during the period" (2011, online).

3. *Visualizing the Illegitimate:* The Poster Man

Graphic documents offer instructive entry points to the study of illegitimate culture, particularly the extraordinary watercolor painting known as *A London Street Scene*, or *The Poster Man*, by musician, singer, and amateur artist John Orlando Parry. The painting is dated 1835 but was still a work in progress as late as 1837 (Cf. Stein 1987, 286, n. 50; Snowman 2010, 36). As a hyperrealist picture of London's early nineteenth-century theatrical life, and a repository of illegitimate culture, it offers an important historical and imaginative underpinning for students to visualize the illegitimate culture surrounding London's theatres.

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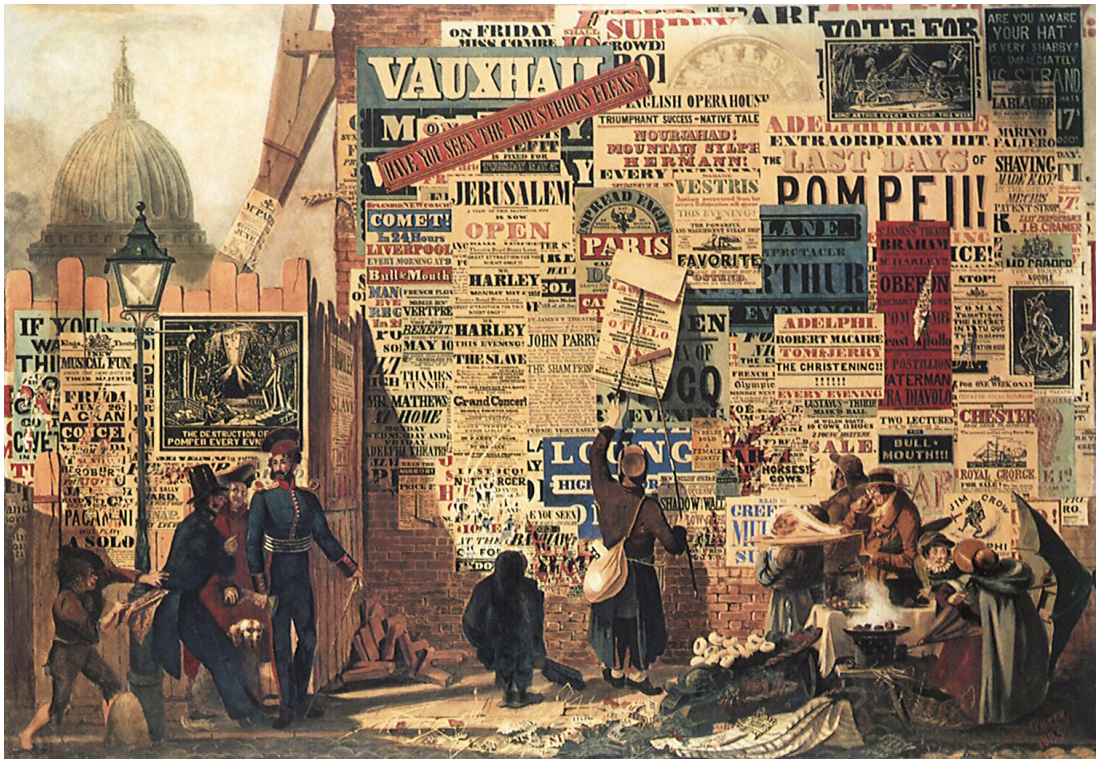
3 The multifaceted impact of Illegitimate Theatre in London and Jane Moody's subsequent research activity is outlined in Kevin Gilmartin's "Introduction" to the special issue of *Studies in Romanticism* 54: 2 (Summer 2015): *An Illegitimate Legacy: Essays in Romantic Theater History in Memory of Jane Moody* (1-9).



John Orlando Parry, A London Street Scene, or, The Poster Man. Reproduced with the permission of Alfred Dunhill Collection.

We are looking at a "London Street scene" – where the main noun is colored with all the nuances of its semantic spectrum: scene as site and spot; as background and context; as an event or happening; as a view and/or spectacle; as performance and as a segment of a play. The unmistakable silhouette of St. Paul's dome, peeping out at the upper left-hand corner from behind the wooden fence, which partially conceals what looks like ongoing renovation work, appears to be the only element in the picture that is untouched by the overwhelming impression of placards, posters, playbills. The viewer is captivated immediately – less by the human figures in the foreground than by the background wall itself. The Street Scene lends itself to a formidable variety of readings from diverse perspectives, including the cultural historian, the musicologist, and the theatre historian. The painting has proven a veritable goldmine for recent studies on early nineteenth-century and Victorian urban culture. I refer in particular to the work of Nicholas Daly (2015) and Gregory Dart (2012), and to the exemplary work of Peter Sheppard Skærved of the Royal

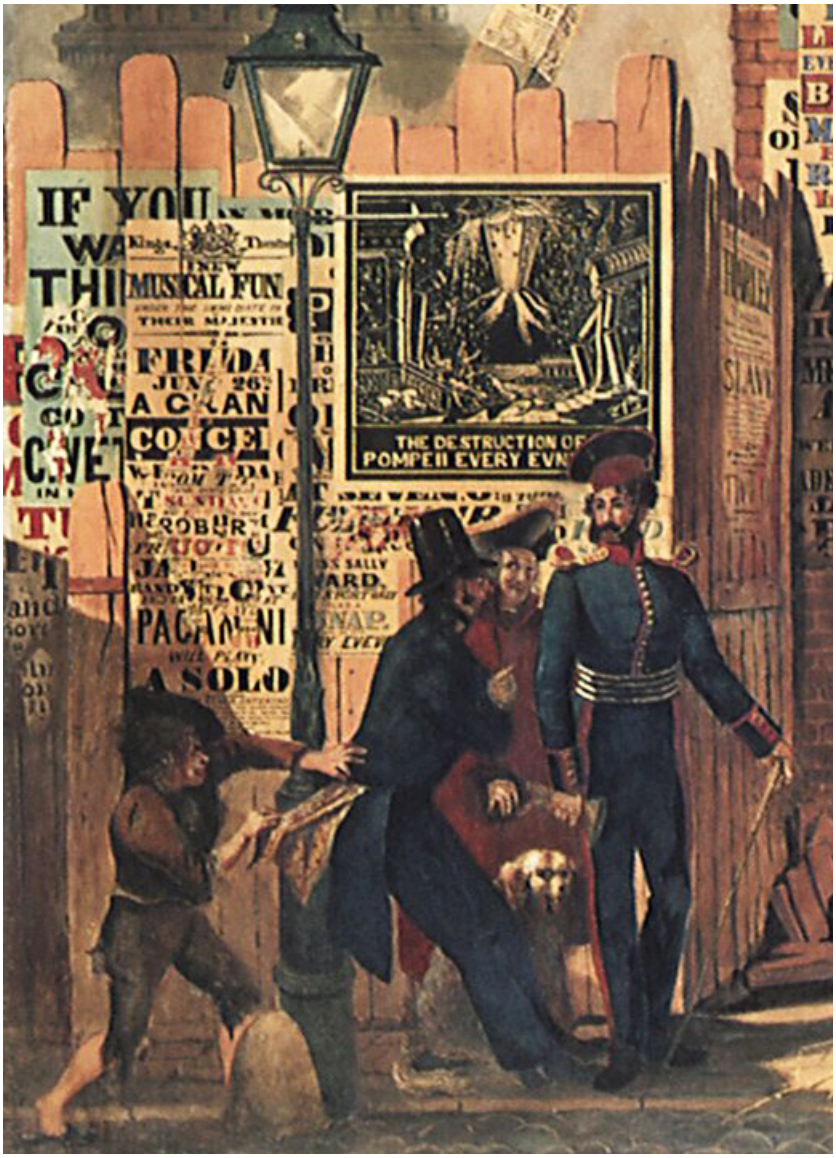
Academy of Music (2007), where the meticulous partition of the canvas into a rectangular grid enables the orderly identification of the shows that come into view in each of the squares.

From a theatre historian's perspective, the painting offers an amazing metonymic image of London's entertainment industry, where the generating principle had long proven to be a process Moody described as "generic miscegenation." (2000, 12). This phrase describes the increasingly competitive production of hybrid spectacles, which undermined the legitimate domain of patent theatres and were perceived as "monstrous" by writers and graphic satirists alike, marking as they did 'the "disintegration of generic and social hierarchies." (Moody 2000, 12-13). In the painting, this pervasive contamination of genres finds its objective correlative in the palimpsest-like trait of the countless playbills advertising theatrical spectacles, concerts, pantomimes, and performances of all sorts. In the classroom, the painting lends itself as both testimony to the pervasiveness and variety of illegitimate culture, and an object for close reading and analysis.

As an example of the pedagogic potential of the canvas consider the following. On the left side, exactly overlooking the Dickensian urchin pickpocket in action, a fittingly dark and ominous poster announces, "The destruction of Pompeii every evening,"[4] ironically pointing to the ephemeral temporal condition, which, in different ways, pertains to both the London Street Scene and to the individual performance.[5]

4 The poster may be referred to a diorama show of John Martin's 1821 picture *The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum*, exhibited at the Egyptian Hall. See Daly 2015, 38.

5 This is a concept I work on with my students at the beginning of my drama courses, particularly with undergraduate modules. I devote a number of preliminary classes to clarifying the key theoretical concepts in theatre, drama, and performance studies, independently of the selection of dramatic texts that are the object of the course. Keir Elam's classic *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (2nd ed. 2003), and Elizabeth Fischer-Lichte's more recent *Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies* (2014) have proved to be effective tools in the classroom to explore these aspects, through lectures supported by ppt. presentations, where I combine discussion of relevant theoretical passages with mainly visual exemplifications.



Parry, A London Street Scene. Detail

Volcano disaster entertainments made their appearance on the London stage and other public venues in the early nineteenth century, after the discovery of the Pompeii and Herculaneum archeological sites in 1748 prompted the rise of modern volcanology, with the scientific contribution and support of English Ambassador in Naples, Sir William Hamilton. As Nicholas Daly has discussed extensively, the popularity of volcano disaster entertainments reached its climax from the 1820s throughout the central decades of the

nineteenth century, forcefully signifying ongoing historical change, and operating through various modes of transmutation between the material and the symbolic, by projecting, as he suggests, "the modern into the past and the forces of modernity onto the natural world."[6]

Returning to the painting, on the right side, peering out from under two clearly more recent playbills, a poster emphatically advertises the "Adelphi Theatre Extraordinary Hit The Last Days of Pompeii!" – the "dramatic spectacle" (as it is neutrally described in the late nineteenth-century print edition) by John Baldwin Buckstone, after Bulwer's "celebrated novel."[7] The play had been first produced at the Adelphi on December 15, 1834, with a remarkable run of 64 nights (Nicoll 1955, 274), and offers a perfect classroom case study of the generic hybridity typifying the domain of illegitimate culture. Examining and familiarizing themselves with the immense wealth of source material, including this painting, reviews, and paper advertisements, students can become more aware of the visual dimensions of illegitimate culture; its propensity for reflecting on current events; and as I have stressed in this essay, its dependence upon mixing multiple genre and media forms. Most of these materials are readily available on free or subscription-based online resources (Cf. Behrendt 2010, 120-33).

While contemporary advertisements in the press consistently describe the dramatic spectacle as a "historical burletta,"[8] Allardyce Nicoll, in line with the *Theatrical Examiner* review (21/12/1834), classifies the play as a melodrama, observing in another context that, as a rule, "these designations are in no way final, and are often indefinite. Thus Domestic and Romantic Dramas fall under the general heading of Melodrama, while a Burletta may be an Operatic Farce or a Burlesque or a Melodrama" (Nicoll 1955, 247). Such a dazzlingly daunting observation from a twentieth-century

6 See chapter 1 of *Demographic Imagination* in particular, and Daly's earlier article (2011, 221). I have dealt with the political implications of the imagery of the flaming mountain on the London stage in a book chapter (2013, 221-34), and in the article "Between Stereotype and Sedition: Romantic-Era Geo-Histories of the Italian South on the London Stage," *Textus* (forthcoming 2023).

7 As the title reads: *The Last Days of Pompeii. A Dramatic Spectacle in Three Acts. Taken from Bulwer's celebrated Novel of the same Title*, by J. B. Buckstone. First Produced at the Adelphi Theatre, Jan. 5, 1835 (London: Dick's Standard Plays No. 829, [1887]).

8 *The Morning Post*, 15 December 1834; *The Examiner*, 21 December 1834.

magisterial voice of theatre history can serve as a catchphrase for a class on illegitimate theatre, in that it pins down hybridity as its defining trait, as did the iconic Monster Melodrame print, which also serves as an excellent tool in the classroom.[9]

Exceeding the space-time boundaries of the painting, as an indisputable sign of success and a hilarious post-illegitimate coda, the comic treatment for the Pompeii narrative, Robert Reece's burlesque *The Very Last Days of Pompeii!* (1872, Vaudeville Theatre), ideally completes a viable didactic itinerary through the illegitimate paradigm in the direction of self-reflexivity. William Buckstone's "dramatic spectacle" had capitalized on the spectacular potential of the volcanic eruption in the concluding "grand tableau": "At this moment, the fire breaks forth from the mountain, and the walls of the arena fall. Everybody cries, 'The earthquake – the earthquake!' [...] All in confusion and screams till curtain falls on a grand tableau."[10] Reece's burlesque, as the sensational frontispiece of the print edition announces, enacts a complete "Bulwer-sement" of the classic drama, which includes the anti-climactic laying bare of the theatrical device:

Arbaces. (rising) Wretched Pompeians, accept my pity. For see the avenging mountain –
[A Man is seen trying to light a squib at the top of mountain]
All. (laughing) No, it don't!
Glaucus. Not till the tag is spoken, friend, it won't.[11]

As viewers and students of *A London Street Scene*, we have hardly scratched the surface of this palimpsest of playbills – from Thomas Morton's musical drama *The Slave*, first performed in 1816, which is evoked twice, to Thomas Dartmouth Rice's grim and disturbing Jim Crow entertainment in the barely

9 *The Satirist* print appears to share the cumulative logic that informs *The Poster Man*, and thus lends itself to the students' appreciation of its separate components, while at the same time providing an effective representation of its dynamics of simultaneous interactions.

10 Buckstone [1887], 15. The otherwise unsympathetic review in the *Theatrical Examiner* had remarked "the whole general array and splendour and fitting up of the stage, with the triumphant catastrophe at the close," as contributing "a series of effects of great power and interest." See "Adelphi," *The Examiner*, 21/12/1834, 806.

11 Reece [n. d.]), 25. See Daly 2015, 41.

visible playbill of the Adelphi,[12] to an 'operatic extravaganza' like William Thomas Montcrieff's stage adaptation of Pierce Egan's serialised novel *Tom and Jerry, or Life in London*. A little like Jerry, the country lad initiated to London Life by his cousin, friend, and sly mentor, Tom, we are "at fault," in the attempt of doing full justice to the amazing richness of this visual text, which replicates the "illegitimate" phantasmagoria of London's theatrical life in full and defiant prominence.

4. *The Challenges of Romantic Theatre Pedagogy*

In the introduction to their collection of essays on *Teaching Romanticism*, David Higgins and Sharon Ruston discuss the challenges that the expansive conceptualization of "Romanticism(s)" has brought about in teaching syllabi. Significantly, Romantic theatre is the one genre-defined category included in the list of topics and "different teaching contexts," which mark the "changing canon," defined increasingly by its new subjects (laboring-class poets and poetry); new (or quasi new) categories of difference and related historical phenomena (gender and sexuality, slavery, empire and race); and new approaches to geopolitical formations, such as the Four Nations and European Romanticism.[13] In that same collection, Thomas Crochunis (2010, 24-37) highlights the complex questions related to the need for anthologies, edited collections, and digital editions appropriate to the task of teaching Romantic theatre and drama. Jeffrey N. Cox and Michael Gamer, in turn, in

12 The craze for blackface performance materialized in America in the late 1820s, with American actor T. D. Rice embodying the grotesque character of Jim Crow. Rice brought his blackface persona to London in 1836, where he performed both at the Surrey and the Adelphi in a variety of entertainments and slight plays. From the data provided in the Adelphi Theatre Calendar, the first performance of a Jim Crow entertainment appears to have taken place at the Adelphi on 6 November 1836. "The Adelphi has gained a valuable importation in the person of Mr. Rice, 'the original Jim Crow,'" as *Figaro in London* was to remark, before abusively observing "He is a most perfect representative of nigger characters; that is to say, if niggers have any characters at all, which we are inclined very much to doubt." See *Figaro in London* 258 (12/11/1836), 188. On Rice's career in London, see Waters 2008, 94-113.
13 See Higgins and Ruston 2010, 1-8 (2). I assume the notion of "category of difference" in the sense discussed in Wheeler 2000.

the introduction to their *Broadview Anthology of Romantic Drama*, inspiringly begin a complex and substantial piece of academic writing by inviting readers to imaginatively experience Romantic theatre: "Imagine yourself heading on foot through the largely dark streets of London on January 25th, 1813" (2003, vii, my italics). The architectural and performance space of Drury Lane as it appeared during this period; the theatre-related, thriving print culture – the playbill and the print pocket edition of the play, all items for sale outside the playhouse – are all conjured up as from the perspective of a time-travelling theatregoer. In terms of teaching efficacy, this suggestion aiming at the imaginative materialization of illegitimate culture strikes a crucial point, and leads us back where we started.

The full reclamation of illegitimate theatrical performance within a thoroughly nuanced historicizing process is one of the many legacies of Jane Moody's scholarship (Gilmartin 2015, 153). Her work highlights the relevance of experiencing the vitality of illegitimate productions within Romantic-era theatrical culture in the pedagogic process. We can recreate this experience for our students in the classroom by focusing on specific material artifacts that reproduce the experience of illegitimate performances in the theatre, on the streets, and in print. In addition to artifacts like *A London Street Scene*, there are more and more opportunities to retrieve the music audiences would have listened to, supplementing the visual dynamics with sound recordings. The impressive recorded performance of Obi, available in part in the dedicated *Praxis volume of the Romantic Circles site* is a case in point (Rzepka ed. 2002). The collaborative staging of both the pantomime and the melodrama actualizations of this key drama in the repertory of slavery-related plays entailed the involvement of students as well as professional actors and the academic staff in two different venues. Scenes, songs, and dances from the Obi pantomime and melodrama are encapsulated in a dramatic frame conceived in homage to the great African-American actor Ira Aldridge.[14] The Obi performance available for public use on the Romantic Circles site reminds us of the great relevance of ICT (Information and Communications Technology) tools in retrieving

14 Cf. Charles Rzepka's introduction in Rzepka 2002. The first staging of *Obi: A Play in the Life of Ira Aldridge*, the "Paul Robeson" of the 19th Century was at the Playwright's Theater in Boston, on July 18, 2000. The second production was at Arizona State University, during the Conference of the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism (NASSR).

and resuscitating the dramatic life of texts from the distant past; at the same time, the virtual coexistence of its different forms in the digital space conveys the primary significance of genre in the performance and transmission of the values and ideology underlying the theatre of Romanticism (Cf. Cox 2002).

Acted performance is by definition a most effective tool for teachers and students. The relevance of experiencing the vitality of both legitimate and illegitimate Romantic-era theatrical culture in and outside the classroom comes to fruition in events such as the memorable premiere of Joanna Baillie's mixed drama *Witchcraft*, held at the University of Bologna by Lilla Maria Crisafulli's students in 2002. On a much less demanding but fully satisfying basis, I can add the performance experiments of the pantomimical sofa scene in Hannah Cowley's comedy *A Day in Turkey, or The Russian Slaves* (1791), which proved to be extremely successful in a class of Italian undergraduate students and in a hilarious post-graduate seminar on Romantic theatre I held in Liverpool.[15] Retrieving the scores and recording the stage music of legitimate and illegitimate plays alike, thus making them available anew,[16] are still other viable ways to bring Romantic-era theatrical culture back to life, as was also the case with the Slavery on Stage experiment.[17] These forms of documentation allow the repossessing of material traces of that world, in the same way as they take on supplementary life in that still life snapshot – the unceasing, ever-repeating and ever new performance work of *The Poster Man*.

15 I owe this teaching tactic to Greg Kucich, who first experimented it during a one-day conference at the University of Parma in 2007, hosted by Diego Saglia. On the 'illegitimate' sofa scene in Cowley's comedy, see Kucich 2006, 96.

16 As aims to do the website "Romantic-Era Songs," set up by Paul Douglass and Frederick Burwick, which collects music sheets and recordings of "Theater and Popular Songs, Catches, Airs, and Art Songs of the Romantic Period, as well as Some Later Settings of Lyrics and Poems of Romantic-Era Poets." http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/douglass/music/index.html (accessed 27/11/2022).

17 The recording of a number of musical pieces from the scores of the comic operas *The Padlock* (Charles Dibdin) and *Inkle and Yarico*, and the pantomime *Obi* (both by Samuel Arnold), was carried out by musicologist and performer Angela Annese, who took part in the project of my Slavery on Stage (2009).

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