



PROJECT MUSE®

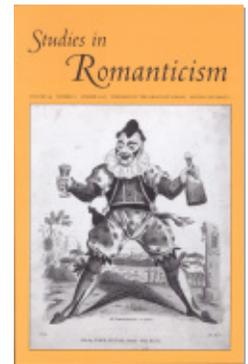
An Illegitimate Legacy: Essays in Romantic Theater History
in Memory of Jane Moody

Kevin Gilmartin

Studies in Romanticism, Volume 54, Number 2, Summer 2015, pp. 151-158
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/srm.2015.0020>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/741576/summary>

An Illegitimate Legacy: Essays in Romantic Theater History in Memory of Jane Moody

Introduction

I FIRST MET JANE MOODY IN LOS ANGELES IN THE EARLY 1990S, ON ONE OF what would become many of her visits to Southern California, where she was drawn by the rich theater history collections at the Huntington Library in San Marino. We had been put in touch by Marilyn Butler, and Jane would later tell a story that had escaped my memory. It seems I was late arriving to the coffee shop where we agreed to meet, and everything she knew about me in advance—an acquaintance of Marilyn Butler, living in Pasadena, working at the Huntington Library, and writing about Cobbett's *Rural Rides*—had her tentatively approaching men over the age of sixty-five to see if they might be Kevin Gilmartin. While the story always ended with her pleasant surprise at finding that I was not yet in my declining years, there was too just a hint of mischief and a sidelong glance, as if to ask, “really, Kevin, Cobbett's *Rural Rides*. . . ?” What I do remember from that day was an intense and demanding conversation—Jane was always efficient—about the politics of legitimacy in early nineteenth-century Britain. She was keen to learn what she could from my work on radical journalism, but it became disconcertingly clear to me over the course of a long coffee break that she knew as much as I did about the late Napoleonic and postwar era radical reform movement in which “legitimacy” became a fiercely contested political term. The development of London's minor theaters provided the institutional framework for her first book, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840*, and for much of her subsequent research and writing, but legitimacy and illegitimacy were terms that Jane developed through a dazzling range of formal, aesthetic, performative, institutional, cultural, social, and political registers. She was a truly multi-disciplinary scholar in part because she could not help but think in kaleidoscopic ways. A theater historian first—and for many of us trained in Romanticism in the 1980s and 1990s, that was something new to reckon with—but an accomplished social and cultural historian as well, and a sen-

sitive literary critic capable of working effortlessly across three distinct eras, the long eighteenth century, Romanticism, and the Victorian period.

There were other conversations in Southern California in the years to come, but it was only later, when we became colleagues in the Department of English and the Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies (CECS) at the University of York, that I learned just how little of Jane Moody was encompassed even in her remarkable scholarly range. Although I arrived as she was guiding the English department through the demanding final stages of the British government's "Research Assessment Exercise," with a sure administrative hand that would be practiced again when she became founding director of the university's Humanities Research Centre, Jane found time to introduce me to department colleagues and staff and to everything that was worth knowing about the city of York. And all of it opened out upon one or another dimension of her own life—a life lived with characteristic energy and generosity, and invariably knit together by personal connections that I was invited to join. The flat she found for me was available to sublet because a friend had just moved out to become the first resident curator of Shandy Hall, so with the sublet came a trip to Shandy Hall and a personal guided tour; I learned that the best way to see the massive York Minster cathedral on more intimate terms was at night, for Evensong, when it turned out Jane would be performing with the choir; I found that the riches of the Minster library were more readily accessed, and many hours saved, with a few select introductions from Jane; and dinners at her home in Upper Price Street were a chance to gather with university colleagues while also being introduced to local writers, artists, and artisans. Jane appeared to be on a first name basis with most of the city of York. Students adored her, though her exacting standards were legendary, and it was a rare meeting with her in a café or pub that wasn't punctuated by greetings from current and former students. The mischievous sense of humor ran through it all. One year Jane arranged the annual CECS staff and student excursion as a day trip to the Georgian Theatre Royal in Richmond, a rare surviving eighteenth-century provincial theater. On the bus ride out Jane improvised an expansive introductory lecture on provincial theater, drawing on research that was sadly left unfinished at her death.¹ On the bus ride back there were fewer but choice words about what our docents had got wrong, delivered with a severity that was only half-mocking, and with a sense of humor that was equally directed at her herself.

1. A sense of the contours of the project can be gleaned from her essay "Dictating to the Empire: Performance and Theatrical Geography in Eighteenth-Century Britain," in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730–1830*, eds. Jane Moody and Daniel O'Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 21–41.

In gathering these essays in memory of Jane Moody in *Studies in Romanticism*, I have the advantage of introducing just one strand of her scholarship, reasonably within my own range. She wrote intensively about British theater in the Romantic period, and about authors (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lamb, Byron, Keats, Hunt, and Hazlitt) and issues (emotion, imagination, experiment, transgression, revolution) that have long figured centrally in Romantic studies. Yet it is worth acknowledging at the outset that much of her work as a theater historian applied critical pressure to “Romanticism” as a concept and period designation. Her 2000 *Journal of Victorian Culture* article surveying the state of theater studies for the nineteenth century sets out from the blunt proposition that “theatre does not lend itself to a clear-cut historiographic division between the Romantic and Victorian periods,” with “late-Georgian” serving as a less misleading designation for theatrical institutions and practices through the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth centuries.² What is more striking, though, even through the essay’s preliminary mapping of terms, is the way revisionist claims are deftly advanced with and against the embedded assumptions of Romanticism and theater studies alike. A willingness “to make theatrical performance (rather than dramatic texts)” the object of study is offered as a challenge to the “recurring preoccupation in contemporary scholarship on Romantic theatre” with “the meaning of the closet—that private place of contemplation which writers like Charles Lamb and Lord Byron invoked as a necessary refuge from the sensuous corporeality of stage representation.” At the same time, theater historians can “take a number of useful leaves from recent studies of Romantic theatre, especially those leaves concerned with the relationship between dramatic theory, theatrical practice, and the construction of nationhood.”³

Moody’s own writing about closet drama reveals a critical method that does not simply reject Romantic categories, but instead seeks to understand their historical development so that they can be equally deployed and revised. Her 2002 chapter on “Romantic Shakespeare” situates the way the “stage was being pitted against the page” in the Romantic period within the wider framework of “a struggle . . . for control over the nation’s leading playwright.” Far from providing evidence of a familiar Romantic withdrawal from history and social circumstance, the “eloquent tenacity” of Lamb’s case against corporeal performance becomes an index of contemporary theatrical conditions, which open out upon multiple and competing interpretive frameworks:

2. Jane Moody, “The State of the Abyss: Nineteenth Century Performance and Theatre Historiography in 1999,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 5 (2000): 112, 119.

3. Moody, “State of the Abyss,” 119–20.

Lamb's argument may seem perverse to us: what kind of identity can a Shakespeare play have beyond performance? To some extent, we need to understand this point of view as a response to specific performance conditions: mutilated acting editions and vast, cavernous playhouses (Sheridan's Drury Lane Theatre could accommodate 3,611 spectators, whereas Garrick's had seated about 2,000) that demanded an extravagant and unsubtle performance style. Even the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hazlitt complained, were "full-grown, well-fed" and "six feet high." But Romantic scepticism about performance must also be seen as a rearguard action that aspired to defend the nation's greatest playwright from the "leveling" effects of stage production and those cheap, spectacular effects deemed necessary to attract large audiences.⁴

A few years later, in a chapter of *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*, Moody teased out similar contradictions as part of a synthetic treatment of what she termed a "theatrical revolution" running from 1776 to 1843. (Her willingness to frame essays and books with dates that just exceed the Romantic period is itself instructive.) Yet even as the chapter drew to a close with the complaint that "literary historians have often interpreted the late Georgian theatre through the eyes of disappointed Romantic playwrights such as Coleridge, Shelley, and Byron," Moody returned to the partial salience of Romantic conceptions, observing in particular "the intricate relationship between stage and closet in the late Georgian theatre."⁵

When *Illegitimate Theatre in London* appeared in 2000, it came in the wake of more than a decade of new historicist and feminist challenges to a narrow Romantic canon, and contributed in its way to both of those revisionist critical enterprises. The prologue strikes a bold note, noticing "theatre's virtual absence from Romantic scholarship," and making the case for an institutional history of late Georgian theater that pivots on the illegitimate stage as "a wide-ranging critique of theatre's position in the literary history of Romanticism," particularly where the celebration of "a 'mental theatre' consisting of lyrical, experimental tragedies" requires, for its antithesis, a repudiation of "the irrational and capricious desires of mass audiences and the degraded condition of dramatic institutions such as Drury Lane and

4. Jane Moody, "Romantic Shakespeare," in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*, eds. Stanley Wells and Sarah Stanton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 40.

5. Jane Moody, "The Theatrical Revolution, 1776–1843," in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre, Volume 2: 1660 to 1895*, ed. Joseph Donohue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 215.

Covent Garden.”⁶ Again though, in looking back over the book, it is striking how Moody works both with and against Romantic terms, in ways that are often local and immediate, but also involve her larger interpretive aims. The “denunciation of illegitimate theatre” became a “Romantic project” under the auspices of Wordsworth and Coleridge, with Coleridge above all responsible for the canonization of “an absolute distinction between legitimate and illegitimate drama.”⁷ Against this, however, and particularly against the Lake school identification of illegitimate theater with “vulgarity, lowness, political radicalism, and cultural subversion,” there is the willingness of Hazlitt, Keats, Leigh Hunt, and other younger Romantics to discover “the promise of anarchic freedom from dull convention and stultifying precedent in the illegitimate stage.”⁸

In this sense, Moody’s institutional history of late Georgian theater offers one of the most compelling arguments we have—*after the skeptical turn* against a Romantic ideology, and from *outside* literary history—for the saliency of a two-generation model of Romantic literary development to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British culture. Leigh Hunt’s 1831 *Tatler* essay “attacking the complacency of the Theatres Royal whilst praising the freshness and originality of certain minor plays,” in itself “a miniature manifesto for dramatic free trade” and for the vitality of the illegitimate stage, becomes programmatic for large stretches of the book.⁹ And for Moody’s later work. The essay on the “theatrical revolution” presents a theatrical world turned upside down, in terms that are reminiscent of Hunt, with the well known patent theaters mired in “a history of debt, bankruptcy and cultural ignominy,” while the undiscovered minor theaters went about the subversive business of “transform[ing] London’s dramatic culture” through the creation of a vibrant market for “illegitimate forms.” Such forms were characterized by “a profusion and cross-fertilization of dramatic genres,” with implications that extend well beyond the stage, as illegitimacy succeeded in dramatizing “an age of extraordinary social mobility, technological innovation and colonial expansion.”¹⁰

Yet it may be that Moody instantiates a two-generational model of literary history on the way to other and more challenging critical purposes. What Coleridge insisted upon, after all, was not just the devaluation of illegitimate theater, but the more essential and “absolute distinction” between

6. Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2–3.

7. Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre*, 55–57.

8. Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre*, 4.

9. Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre*, 33–34.

10. Moody, “Theatrical Revolution,” 206, 207, 210.

legitimacy and illegitimacy. What is remarkable about *Illegitimate Theatre in London* is not just the way it manages to provide an institutional history of the legitimate stage too, with Drury Lane and Covent Garden contending for survival against the transgressive innovations of the Royal Coburg, the Surrey, the Royal Brunswick, the Pavilion, and the Olympic, but also the way it undermines (mischievously? perversely?) the very antithetical categories it requires. There turns out to be a “complex and unstable relationship between the political and generic connotations of illegitimate theatre” with respect to legitimacy, in part because Drury Lane and Covent Garden drew on the innovations and energies of the minor theaters, but also because—in theory and in practice—illegitimacy “is an unstable category which crosses the boundaries between institutions and indeed between genres.”¹¹ Throughout her work Moody was a master of the unstable dialectic that became a pivot, not to higher synthesis, but rather to an appreciation of the complexity and hybridity of cultural forms, and to a recognition of the way an object of study invariably challenged and unraveled fixed terms of analysis. I have already said that *Illegitimate Theatre in London* is a history of legitimate as well as illegitimate theater. It is also, through Coleridge, Wordsworth, Lamb, Byron, Hunt, Hazlitt, Keats, and a host of other period voices, a history of theatrical criticism as well as theatrical practice; and the particular insight about illegitimacy as a destabilizing phenomenon gathers persuasive force in part because it is teased out from contemporary sources, notably second generation commentators like Hazlitt who can be invoked on behalf of the illegitimate stage even as they prove ambivalent in ways that cannily recapitulate (and therefore undo) the distinction between first and second generation Romantic writing.

There are other ways to get at this point about how Romantic assumptions are mobilized even as they are challenged in Moody’s work, with esstranging effects for both the traditional canon and the revisionist challenge that was the prevailing mode of analysis through her own career. The “‘revolution’ in acting,” and notably Shakespearean acting, undertaken by Edmund Kean—set against the “dignity, grandeur and majesty” of Charles Kemble’s performative style, itself “a magnificent and spectacular advertisement for the political establishment”¹²—may represent the most passionately Romantic commitment in Moody’s own scholarship, with Byron, Keats, and Coleridge all contributing to an account of Kean’s fiery language, emotional intensity, and startling originality. Yet coming as it does near the end of *Illegitimate Theatre in London*, as part of a chapter on illegitimate celebrity, the portrait of Kean is fully conditioned by the preceding

11. Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre*, 72–78.

12. Moody, “Romantic Shakespeare,” 43–44.

history, and Moody warns against “the danger of romanticizing Kean” in ways that obscure the alignment of “his distinctly *illegitimate* revolution” with the practices of the illegitimate stage and with a calculated animosity towards the patent theaters. Against Romantic preconceptions, the sense of Kean’s “unexpected brilliance and unconscious virtuosity” turns out to misrepresent his “deliberate and self-conscious artistry”: “Far from being a wild, unstudied genius, Kean’s theatrical revolution was the work of an iconoclastic actor who defined himself in opposition to the traditions of legitimate performance.”¹³ Particular elements of his manner of performance—the “sudden, extreme transitions between emotions,” the concern for action rather than language, the mastery of silence or “mute business”—can be traced directly to melodrama and other domains of illegitimate performance.¹⁴ If this takes us away from Romanticism, and particularly away from Coleridge’s conception of Shakespeare as “philosophical aristocrat,”¹⁵ it also reasserts the two-generation framework for literary history. As with her narrative of a moribund licensed stage giving way to the innovations and transgressions of illegitimacy, Moody aligns her revisionist account of Kean’s studied and calculated genius with second generation criticism, in this case Hazlitt, who insisted that “Mr. Kean’s style of acting” was “throughout elaborate and systematic” and “not in the least of the unpremeditated, *improvisatori* kind.”¹⁶ Yet the critic himself cannot escape a dialectical design, and for this admirer of Hazlitt, one of the more challenging implications of Moody’s institutional history of late Georgian theater is a recognition that the contradictory prose style of *A View of the English Stage* (1818) was not Hazlitt’s own achievement, but rather a consequence of his sustained critical engagement with the experience of illegitimate performance.

The essays gathered in this special issue of *Studies in Romanticism* all involve theater in the Romantic period, and engage some aspect of Jane Moody’s own interest in late Georgian illegitimate theater—its performance practices, its material forms and geographical distribution, its generic transgressions and innovations, its emotional range, and its relation to the licensed stage. The collection grew out of a special session in Jane’s memory at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association in January 2013, and I want to thank the other members of the executive committee for the English Romantic Period at that time (Miranda Burgess, Celeste Langan, Marjorie Levinson, and Maureen McLane) for supporting my session proposal. The panel participants agreed, after the shock of Jane’s death

13. Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre*, 230.

14. Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre*, 231–33.

15. Moody, “Romantic Shakespeare,” 56.

16. Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre*, 234.

and a number of difficult occasions for mourning and commemoration, that the conference session would be an occasion to celebrate an extraordinary career of scholarly research and writing—a career that helped establish theater studies in Romanticism even as it brought theater studies into a more sustained dialogue with literary and cultural history. For this collection of essays, as for the original conference session, contributors were not asked to engage Jane's work in any particular way. For me, a reward in editing the collection has been to see not just the many dimensions of Jane's work that are reflected here, but also the distinct ways in which her achievement and influence are acknowledged. When Jane Moody died, Romantic studies lost one of its most original and distinctive critical voices, and many of us lost an extraordinary colleague and friend. There is woven through these essays rich evidence of the way she continues to shape our lives and our work.

Kevin Gilmartin
California Institute of Technology

Bibliography

- Moody, Jane. "Dictating to the Empire: Performance and Theatrical Geography in Eighteenth-Century Britain." In *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730–1830*, edited by Jane Moody and Daniel O'Quinn, 21–41. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- . *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- . "Romantic Shakespeare." In *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*, edited by Stanley Wells and Sarah Stanton, 37–57. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- . "The State of the Abyss: Nineteenth Century Performance and Theatre Historiography in 1999." *Journal of Victorian Culture* 5 (2000): 112–28.
- . "The Theatrical Revolution, 1776–1843." In *The Cambridge History of British Theatre, Volume 2: 1660 to 1895*, edited by Joseph Donohue, 199–215. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.