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John Pruitt

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# ROBERT DODSLEY

## Eighteenth-Century Play Collector and Theater Historian

John Pruitt

*I*n the March 24–26, 1743 *London Evening Post*, bookseller Robert Dodsley requested the public's assistance with the ambitious project of compiling a multivolume collection of rare but representative English plays:

As all our Old Plays, except Shakespeare's, Johnson's and Beaumont and Fletcher's, are become exceeding scarce and extravagantly dear, I propose, if I can procure 200 Subscribers, to select from such of our Dramatick Writers, as are of any considerable Repute, about Forty or Fifty Plays. I shall take only one or two of the best from each Author, as a Specimen of their Manner, and to shew the Humour of their Times. There are also many single Plays well

worth preserving; such as the *Gorboduc* of Lord Buckhurst, the *Marriage Night* of Lord Faulkland, and some others. I will print them in a handsome manner, in Pocket Volumes, and at so cheap a Rate that they shall not exceed Sixpence each Play. In making this Collection I shall not rely on my own Opinion, but consult the most judicious of my Friends, who have promised me their best Assistance in this Work.<sup>1</sup>

While gathering titles from more than four hundred readers, Dodsley perused through Knight Master of Ceremonies Clement Cotterel Dormer's private collection and purchased plays belonging to the Harleian collection through private agreement with its catalogue's compiler, Thomas Osborne. After acquiring nearly seven hundred plays of sufficient literary and moral value to release to the public, he selected sixty written between John Bale's *A Tragedy or Interlude, Manifesting the Chief Promises of God unto Man* (1537) and Thomas Betterton's *The Revenge* (1680), organized them relatively chronologically, introduced each play with a brief performance history, prefaced the collection with "a short historical Essay on the Rise and Progress of the *English Stage*" through 1642, and titled the twelve volumes *A Select Collection of Old Plays* (1744–1745).<sup>2</sup>

In scholarship on the definition of English "classics" and on the creation of literary canons, Margaret Ezell and others argue that publishers and booksellers compiled series of plays as a means of attracting middle-class readers who enjoyed collecting these new commodities in order to display their wealth (and, tangentially, their patriotism).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as the

<sup>1</sup> In Ralph Straus, *Robert Dodsley: Poet, Publisher, and Playwright* (London: John Lane, 1910), 63.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Dodsley, ed., *A Select Collection of Old Plays*, 10 vols. (London, 1744), 1:ii, original emphasis. Hereafter referenced as *SC*. Supplemental volumes eleven and twelve were published in 1745. Although not unfamiliar with dramatic writing himself, Dodsley generally neglected publishing and selling plays. According to James E. Tierney's survey, Dodsley acted as bookseller or publisher for only thirty-three plays, five critical works on drama, and six critical works on theater, choosing instead to specialize in poetry, prose, the classics, and religion. See Robert Dodsley, *The Correspondence of Robert Dodsley, 1733–1764*, ed. James E. Tierney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 26–28.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret J. M. Ezell, *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 129–31. The 1774 *Donaldson v. Beckett* ruling, ending a common law right to perpetual copyright, has long been recognized as an important event in the history of publishing, as established by Trevor Ross in "Copyright and the Invention of Tradition,"

owner of Tully's Head bookshop, Dodsley unquestionably took interest in a voracious readership and a thriving business, but he sought to accomplish more than entertaining his customers and populating their bookshelves. At the time of the *Collection's* publication, he circulated among Lyttelton, Bolingbroke, and Alexander Pope's social circle, recognized for remonstrating against the nefarious Prime Minister Robert Walpole's hegemonic distribution of power and control over state institutions.<sup>4</sup> The patent theaters, one such institution brought to bay, buckled under the weight of the Stage Licensing Act of 1737, through which Walpole attempted to revive a centuries old but struggling system of censorship.<sup>5</sup>

My interest in the *Collection* lies in its cutting response to the Licensing Act. Dodsley uncovered, printed, and circulated the nation's

*Eighteenth-Century Studies* 26 (1992): 1–27, and by Mark Rose in *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). A great deal also focuses on the similar role of Dodsley's *Collection of Poems by Several Hands* (1748–1758) in the creation and marketing of mid-century literary value and taste through the promotion and invention of the “modern classic.” See George Justice, *The Manufacturers of Literature: Writing and the Literary Marketplace in Eighteenth-Century England* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002), 112–43; Michael F. Suarez, S.J., “Dodsley's *Collection of Poems* and the Ghost of Pope: The Politics of Literary Reputation,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 88 (1994): 189–206; and Michael F. Suarez, S.J., “Trafficking in the Muse: Dodsley's *Collection of Poems* and the Question of Canon,” in Alvaro Ribeiro, S.J., and James G. Basker, eds., *Tradition in Transition: Women Writers, Marginal Texts, and the Eighteenth-Century Canon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 297–313.

<sup>4</sup> Evidence of Dodsley's oppositional politics surfaces in his early writings, where the future proprietor of Tully's Head celebrates his encounters with the literati and aristocracy as transforming experiences significantly shaping his political and cultural commentary. In fact, following the success of Dodsley's earliest meritocratic writings defending working-class virtues—*Servitude: A Poem* (1729), *A Muse in Livery: or The Footman's Miscellany* (1732), and his play *The Footman* (Goodman's Fields, 7 March 1732)—Pope presented him with one hundred pounds toward opening the bookshop. Shortly afterward, it became an unofficial headquarters for oppositional writers, all orchestrating campaigns against Walpole by composing and distributing anti-ministerial propaganda. Just as Bolingbroke and other writers had gathered at Dawley, Bolingbroke's country home, and maligned Walpole in the Opposition newspaper *The Craftsman* and famous satires such as Pope's *The Dunciad* and Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, Dodsley began fostering, publishing, and writing his own oppositional texts. For an extensive survey of these authors and writings, see Isaac Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and His Circle: The Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), and Bertrand A. Goldgar, *Walpole and the Wits: The Relation of Politics to Literature, 1722–1742* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976).

<sup>5</sup> For a brief history of the application of this authority, see Richard Findlater, *Banned! A Review of Theatrical Censorship in Britain* (London: MacGibbon, 1967), 1–35.

literary heritage embodied in a series of forgotten, long since performed dramatic texts whose plots often critique or satirize a weakened or corrupt court, in order to question the nature of the state's power structures. Complementing these sixty plays, his introductory "short historical Essay" manipulates English history in order to comment on Walpole's oppressive regime. Specifically, Dodsley's interpretation of the nation's theater history satirically razes political hierarchies and immobilizes public figures seeking to extinguish drama and histrionics arguably unsuitable for public consumption. As his history traces the tensions between performance and state politics from the earliest sanctions against acting in England, Dodsley alludes to adversarial encounters among Court, Church, and playhouse through 1642 in order to chronicle and endorse the perpetuation of unlicensed performances.

### \* Collecting the Playhouse Ghosts: Dodsley's Inspiration \*

Booksellers and editors such as Dodsley who shaped the eighteenth-century literary marketplace found selections of assembled texts—recognizable and obscure, original and adapted, complete and fragmented—to exercise a significant amount of cultural and political power and found collecting useful for "construct[ing] systems of knowledge which inform and support social action."<sup>6</sup> In one of the first extensive studies of literary

<sup>6</sup> Susan M. Pearce, introduction to *Ancient Voices*, vol. 1, *The Collector's Voice: Critical Readings in the Practice of Collecting*, ed. Susan M. Pearce and Alexandra Bounia (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), xiii–xiv. For specific work in the long eighteenth century, see Elizabeth Eger's "Fashioning a Female Canon: Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and the Politics of the Anthology," in *Women's Poetry in the Enlightenment: The Making of a Canon, 1730–1820*, eds., Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain, (London: MacMillan, 1999), which suggests that, in anthologies of women's poetry, "Questions of access, representation and gender politics which are at stake in literary studies today were being rehearsed in the eighteenth century with similar urgency" (204). Likewise, in *"Profit and Delight": Printed Miscellanies in England, 1640–1682* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), Adam Smyth recognizes a similar discourse in Commonwealth miscellanies, whose compilers often encoded Bacchanalian verse in order to foster a Royalist agenda. Addressing the eighteenth-century institutionalization of British culture, John Brewer similarly argues that critics of varied backgrounds and levels of expertise such as Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Warton, and Charles Burney set out to collect the nation's aesthetic productions and contextualize its literary and artistic schools of thought in order to construct channels of social interaction and to create a discursive space encouraging

anthologies, Barbara M. Benedict suggests that contextualizing previously published English works within a new English anthology creates the illusion of an unequivocally consistent national ideology or effaces political subtexts all together. In fact, Benedict defines the anthology in part by the inclusivity achieved through detachment and democracy, through "bridg[ing] diverse social groups by . . . recontextualizing literature to neutralize political messages." Because anthologies serve "as objects imbued with meaning and as mediators disseminating meanings," a dialectical relationship between compilers and readers cements the importance of these texts for the transmission of literature and its fashions, preservation, and reception.<sup>7</sup>

Such an interpretation does hold partially true, for anthologies certainly reinforce the importance of specific texts according to their compilers, editors, and publishers. But when turning specifically to Dodsley's *Collection* and to earlier collections of plays written and staged before 1642, we find that the political complexities enriching these artifacts and relics actually replaced their apolitical character. With their contents recontextualized during the era of Walpole's most egregious actions against the theater, the value attributed to collections of dramatized artifacts rested in a shared dependence both on the preservation of the original texts and on the meanings with which their readers and publishers endowed them.

At issue lies the tradition of deifying and commodifying the literary dead as personifications of English heritage. By the time of the publication of Dodsley's *Collection*, many Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Carolinean dramatists had achieved epic status alongside Shakespeare, Jonson, and Beaumont and Fletcher as virtuous and moral representatives of the republic of letters permanently inscribing England's prominence in the arts.<sup>8</sup> Metaphors of disinterment and resuscitation pervade the introductions to a variety of these volumes, for stationers and authors proudly articulated

conversation and debate (*The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997], 427–89).

<sup>7</sup> Barbara M. Benedict, *Making the Modern Reader: Cultural Mediation in Early Modern Anthologies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 28, 31.

<sup>8</sup> In *Before the Empire of English: Literature, Provinciality, and Nationalism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), Alok Yadav recognizes that Restoration and early eighteenth-century scholars and critics often "enshrine[d] the culture heroes" or accomplished poets of previous centuries—Shakespeare, Spenser, and occasionally Chaucer—as a fundamentally masculine iconography of national heritage (28).



their allegiance to a spectral army of English dramatists and cultivated feelings of nostalgia for an unregulated theater via new publications of collected plays.<sup>9</sup> In fact, despite legislative attempts to control the scale of printing such as through the Long Parliament's 1643 Ordinance for the Regulating of Printing, the 1649 Printing Act, and the 1653 Printing Act, the intentional circulation of many dramatic texts generated an English heritage anathema to the dominant Puritan ideology.<sup>10</sup> For example, in an appeal to readers of Robinson and Moseley's publication of Beaumont and Fletcher's *Comedies and Tragedies* (1647), the first collection of plays published after the closing of the theaters, James Shirley challenged his mass audience of patriots to resist the Interregnum government through transgressive acts of reading plays banned from performance:

And now Reader in this *Tragicall Age* where the *Theater* hath been so much out-acted, congratulate thy owne happinesse that in this silence of the Stage, thou hast a liberty to reade these inimitable Playes, to dwell and converse in these immortall Groves, which were only shewd our Fathers in a conjuring glasse, as suddenly removed as represented. . . . [T]he Presse thought too pregnant before shall be now look'd as greatest Benefactor to Englishmen.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This premise is based on David Lowenthal's suggestion that nostalgia conjures "a past that was unified and comprehensible, unlike the incoherent, divided present . . . [W]hat we are nostalgic for is the condition of *having been*, with a concomitant integration and completeness lacking in any present" ("Nostalgia Tells It Like It Wasn't," in *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase, [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989], 29, original emphasis).

<sup>10</sup> Also see Julie Stone Peters, *Congreve, the Drama, and the Printed Word* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), which details the tension between printers, publishers, dramatists, and Roger L'Estrange, Surveyor of the Press, following the Restoration.

<sup>11</sup> In Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *Comedies and Tragedies. Never Printed Before, and Now Published by the Authours Original Copies* (London, 1647), sig. A3<sup>r-v</sup>, original emphasis. Similar attacks and appeals to read as a sign of protest appear in commendatory poems prefacing additional Interregnum collections as well. K.P. argues in "To the Memory of the Most Ingenious and Vertuous Gentleman Mr. Wil Cartwright" that reading plays "Shall rescue us from this dull Imprisonment, / Unsequester our Phansies, and create / A Worth that may upon thy Glories wait" (in William Cartwright, *Comedies, Tragi-Comedies, with Other Poems* [London, 1651], sig. A4<sup>r</sup>), and Aston Cokaine proclaims in "A Preludium to Mr. Richard Bromes Playes" that "we shall still have *Playes*: and though we may / Not them in their full Glories yet display; / Yet we may please our selves by reading them, / Till a more Noble Act this Act condemne" (in Richard Brome, *Five New Playes* [London, 1653], sig. A2<sup>r</sup>).

Responding to the mandatory shift from spectator to reader and from the transience of performance to the stability of print, opponents of Interregnum governance summoned the dramatists who prospered immediately before the Civil Wars in order to defy Commonwealth ideology: the catalyzing political tragedy that precipitated the Interregnum and suppressed the circulation of plays surpassed any staged tragedy closing with a deposed or assassinated monarch.

Although seditious means of attacking the Commonwealth and Protectorate assumed a variety of forms, collections of plays written before 1642 did much to reinvest the power once vested in performance back into stationers who shielded these relics from current censorship laws. By manipulating the theater's ancestry and reconstructing the past from buried relics in order to voice the necessity of reinstating the monarch, the community of stationers reminded their readers of the liberties that had lately existed. Such resistance to a regulated press motivated Royalist stationers Moseley and Brooke to remind readers of the open theaters by inscribing a claim of novelty into the titles of several collections of dramatic works predating the Interregnum, including James Shirley's *Six New Playes . . . Never Printed Before* (1653), Philip Massinger's *Three New Playes . . . Never Before Printed* (1655), and Jasper Mayne's *Two Plaies . . . Both Long Since Written* (1658). The importance of these collections lies in their immediacy, in their explicit challenge to the "Order for Stage-plays to Cease," and in their physical form as markers of heritage shaping and reproducing the popular memory of the theater, as evident in Andrew Crook and Henry Brome's address to the readers of Richard Brome's *Five New Playes* (1658):

We suppose we bring what in these dayes you scarce could hope for, *Five new Playes*. We call them *new*, because 'till now they never were printed. You must not think them *posthumous* Productions, though they come into the world after the *Author's* death: they were all begotten and born (and own'd by Him before a thousand



witnesses) many years since; they then trod the *Stage* (their proper place) though they pass'd not the *Press*.<sup>12</sup>

The implication that readers will experience the past for the price of a new volume of old plays written by a legendary dramatist suggests that converging old with new in a single body reinforces the coexistence of historical context (an era of open theater) and the texts' current roles as agents of remembrance.

In this spirit, conspicuously expanding the drama canon beyond the triumvirate of Shakespeare, Jonson, and Beaumont and Fletcher and marketing the collections as new publications became a common reaction to the absence of legitimate theater. For these collectors, old English texts not only embodied and shaped public perceptions of literary significance but also established a trajectory of the values of national culture through expressions of patriotic sentiment and the consciousness of nationality and national origins. It was through such collections that England fabricated a national tradition emerging into a canon of English drama. Indeed, interpretations of history, heritage, and their relics often define and legitimize a dominant or state-sponsored ideology, for the quest for an explanatory authentic past often generates a conservative institutional framework in the form of state-sponsored monuments and museums attempting to capture and memorialize the nation.<sup>13</sup> Dodsley, however, like his forebears, demonstrated that historical interpretations also substantially undermine that idea. In fact, his speculative narrative of an unregulated national

<sup>12</sup> Richard Brome, *Five New Plays* (London, 1658), sig. A3<sup>r</sup>–<sup>v</sup>. One means of explaining the textual circulation of recent theater history defers to this recognition of England as a nation seeking legitimacy during the Interregnum and the stationers as protectors of the plays, often referenced as gamins seeking their own legitimacy. For example, Richard Meighen dedicates the late Thomas Goffe's collection of *Three Excellent Tragedies* (1656) to Sir Richard Tichborne "lest it wander a fatherlesse Orphan" (sig. A2<sup>r</sup>).

<sup>13</sup> Broadly, in their introduction to *The Cultures of Collecting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), John Elsner and Roger Cardinal view most forms of collecting as an institutional nod to the acquisition and maintenance of power structures. Between governments collecting taxes to maintain civilizations, clergy collecting souls to populate an afterlife, readers collecting texts for decoration and edification, and booksellers collecting readers for financial prosperity, collectors script "a narrative of how human beings have striven to accommodate, to appropriate and to extend the taxonomies and systems of knowledge they have inherited" (2). Hence collections serve either to reinforce or to undermine the dominant categories of the society in which the collections appear.

theater makes no promise to document objectivity or even historical accuracy but instead to define the nature of the English society challenging the legal system.<sup>14</sup> Through such national narratives we find "a past shaped less as progression than as selectively remembered accretion, less as story than as memory and heritage" but often providing the illusion of unification and continuity.<sup>15</sup> Specific to Dodsley, Harry M. Solomon interprets such a conception of the *Collection* and its prefatory theater history as a "patriotic act," an attempt to reconstruct the nation's dramatic inheritance by accumulating its "fugitive pieces," the forgotten English plays.<sup>16</sup> Solomon's term "patriotic" is an appropriate choice because the *Collection* foregrounds resistance to inept disciplinary forces in the English court. In light of Dustin Griffin's premise that patriotism "focuses on the patriot's attachment to his or her country, and on the service the patriot hopes to provide," and to Christine Gerrard's analysis of the discursive uses of English history as a means of measuring the shortcomings of Walpole's regime, Dodsley's mission of serving the nation rather than exclusively attacking the prime minister begins to take shape.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> In *The Age of Elizabeth in the Age of Johnson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), his study of the eighteenth century's historical construction of Elizabethan England, Jack Lynch reminds us that "canons are not disinterested catalogues of great works, but collections that speak to and for the cultures that form them, telling us as much about the age in which they are codified as about the age in which they were written" (37). As their creators make apparent, both the institutional framework within which canons operate and the information they disseminate have a specific social and political role beyond that of simply narrating the past or present.

<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey Cubitt, introduction to *Imagining Nations*, ed. Geoffrey Cubitt (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 10. This reading of Dodsley's essay is also indebted to Frank Palmeri's "Conjectural History and Satire: Narrative as Historical Argument from Mandeville to Malthus (and Foucault)," *Narrative* 14 (2006): 64–84.

<sup>16</sup> Harry M. Solomon, *The Rise of Robert Dodsley: Creating the New Age of Print* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 95.

<sup>17</sup> Dustin Griffin, *Patriotism and Poetry in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 12; Christine Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole: Politics, Poetry, and National Myth, 1725–1742* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 99–247. For further readings on patriot challenges to Walpole, see Kramnick and Goldgar.

## \* The Dodsley/Johnson/Brooke Triumvirate \*

Although only the specter of the Licensing Act haunts his *Collection*, Dodsley manipulates the work by transforming printed relics into evidence confirming the progression of centuries of conquests over unwarranted political intervention in performance spaces. In fact, the Licensing Act itself provided an enticing bit of legislative fodder for much of the literati to nip at, and by summoning the ghosts of dramatists past, Dodsley and his contemporaries expressed similar contempt for its passage. The most notable example, Samuel Johnson's *A Compleat Vindication of the Licensers of the Stage, from the Malicious and Scandalous Aspersions of Mr. Brooke* (1739), ironically delineates a program of absolute censorship stemming from the threat posed by curious readers driven to act on "all those pernicious Sentiments which we shall banish from the Stage [but which] will be vented from the Press."<sup>18</sup> Staunchly defying this rigid formulation of new censorship laws stand the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries—invincible obstacles advocating the propagation of morality, virtue, and the regulation of impulses—shielded from the weight of the Licensing Act by their age and legacy. Arguing that "The Productions of our old Poets are crouded with Passages very unfit for the Ears of an *English* Audience, and which cannot be pronounced without irritating the Minds of the People," Johnson proposes that the Court must struggle to manipulate its subjects driven by this psychological deluge of discomfiting passions released by England's dramatic monuments (25). Against these monolithic tomes, Johnson endorses enlisting an army of deputy licensers and creating an extensive "index expurgatorius" to the old plays in order to separate audiences from these sentiments capable of inciting a rebellion:

I hope the Vigilance of the Licensers will extend to all such Speeches and Soliloquies as tend to recommend the Pleasures of Virtue, the Tranquillity of an uncorrupted Head, and the Satisfactions of conscious Innocence; for though such Strokes as these do not appear to a common Eye to threaten any Danger to the Government, yet it is well known to more penetrating Observers, that they have

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A Compleat Vindication of the Licensers of the Stage, from the Malicious and Scandalous Aspersions of Mr. Brooke* (London, 1739), 27.

such Consequences as cannot be too diligently obviated, or too cautiously avoided. (26)

Johnson's feigned concern rhetorically writes contemporary political drama from the distance of the old plays and their mobilizing effects on audiences. At first glance, it appears that licensing laws may well protect the nation from rebellions instigated by virtue despite the consequential extinction of innovative drama.<sup>19</sup> However, Johnson realizes that authors can retain the integrity of their work in the absence of laws restricting the free circulation of opinions.

Like Johnson's criticism of the Licensing Act, Dodsley's reasons for exhuming obscure plays echo the rationale that their value rests less in artistic merit than in complex contemporary political and social values surrounding censorship of the legitimate stage. On first glance, it appears that Dodsley deliberately made idiosyncratic yet telling choices of what to anthologize: of the sixty in the collection, we find an undercurrent of plays possibly classified as critiques of the court system. Among his choices, Dodsley includes Cyril Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, in which the members of a corrupted and murderous court elect to seize the crown; Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, in which the spirit of Revenge accompanies the ghost of the courtier Andrea to seek vengeance wreaked on his slayer, Balthazar, Prince of Portugal; Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*, whose court and queen violently replace a sexually and politically immoral king with his son, who in turn punishes the traitors; *Gorboduc*, in which two brothers battle over their father's divided kingdom and unleash a civil war; John Webster's *The White Devil*, a tragedy of political intrigue, adultery, and murder involving the house of Medici; John Lyly's *Campaspe*, which questions the strengths and limitations of military power and kingly magnanimity; and John Marston's tragicomedy *The Malcontent*, which satirically depicts a depraved, avaricious, and corrupt court. Many of the comedies also serve as criticisms of the court system. A proud Robin

<sup>19</sup> Matthew J. Kinservik interprets the Licensing Act in terms of similar costs: from a Foucaultian perspective, he argues that the disciplinary function of such a law, where properly exercised, would actually foster the literary efforts of the nation through the creation of new forms of "acceptable" drama under the Lord Chamberlain's direction. See *Disciplining Satire: The Censorship of Satiric Comedy on the Eighteenth-Century London Stage* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2002).

Hood steps in to reunite the feuding kings of Scotland and England in *The Pinner of Wakefield*, and the family and government are reinstated only after a band of thieves battle the state apparatus in John Suckling's *The Goblins*. But because volumes of plays tested the boundaries of Church and Court, such a critique may deliver only partial truth. At the time of Dodsley's compiling the collection, none of the plays he selected lingered in recent theater memory. While several plays from the *Collection* had briefly moved onto the Restoration stage, only Richard Brome's *The Jovial Crew* reached extensive popularity into the eighteenth century before Dodsley's *Collection* appeared, performed nine times between 1661 and 1702 and at least once per season between 1704 and 1724. By contrast, Thomas Tomkis's *Albumazar*, advertised as the source of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, followed second to Brome with only seven performances at Drury Lane during the 1747-1748 season. Of the Restoration plays, only Samuel Tuke's comedy *The Adventures of Five Hours* became popular, performed twenty-eight times between 1663 and 1727. In fact, a survey of early eighteenth-century collections indicates that none of Dodsley's selections had been anthologized at all. Rather than strictly or intentionally seeking out plays that may have mortified the court because of their subject matter, it appears that Dodsley concentrated on the historical context in which the plays were written: the extent to which they are steeped in a history of resistance to anti-theatrical legislation is precisely why the nation must preserve them.

Dodsley approaches his "short historical Essay" with such aims: the satire contextualizing the *Collection*'s sixty plays narrates a conjectural history of the national theater, which flourished despite attempts to tame it, an argument based in a series of events stressing a long tradition of public retaliation against anti-theatrical movements well before the final passing of the Licensing Act. In fact, before he began acquiring plays, Dodsley avenged Henry Brooke as one of the earliest victims of the Licensing Act. During the Drury Lane rehearsals of Brooke's historical tragedy *Gustavus Vasa* in 1739, Lord Chamberlain Grafton canceled its performance without either a clear incentive or opportunity for revision. In the printed text's dedication, the bewildered playwright defends the explicit nationalism of the plot, anchored in liberty and patriotism. Under the auspices of national freedom, "a Security . . . for those Advantages and Privileges that each Man has a Right to, by contributing as a Member to the Weal of that



Community," Brooke asserts his right as an English citizen to challenge Grafton's decision, which "lays me under the Necessity of publishing this Piece, to convince the Public, that (tho' of no valuable Consequence) I am at least inoffensive."<sup>20</sup> More than nine hundred subscribers from merchants to the aristocracy, publicly identifying themselves as patrons of his cause, heeded Brooke's call to arms by donating funds and requesting as many as six copies each for their own libraries. Furthermore, Dodsley elected to act as his publisher, conspicuously referring to the play's acceptance for performance followed by its abrupt rejection by titling the text *Gustavus Vasa, the Deliverer of His Country. A Tragedy. As it was to have been acted at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane*. Circulating printed copies of *Gustavus Vasa* completely disengaged the play from the politically monitored stage and opened it to a more democratic form of criticism. By replacing the Lord Chamberlain with an eclectic reading public, Dodsley and Brooke established a connection between social power and legitimate drama, a connection predicated on the displacement of political approval by popular support.

### \* Dodsley's Revisionist History \*

The cornerstone of Dodsley's *Collection* appears in his "short historical Essay on the Rise and Progress of the *English Stage*," which invariably seeks to expound upon theater histories cloaked by the authority of empirical documents such as Gerard Langbaine's *An Account of the English Dramatick Poets* (1691) and John Downes's *Roscius Anglicanus, or An Historical Review of the Stage* (1708)—registers composed of extensive lists of actors, dramatists, and plays following the accession of Charles II. In theater history he finds fact and fiction interwoven to investigate the nature of the relationship between state politics and public performances, for through this essay the *Collection* communicates its meaning by undermining interpretations of the patent theaters as court-directed and monitored media. In other words, the series of tomes revises the significance of the single play as an icon of the past to the collection as a

<sup>20</sup> Henry Brooke, *Gustavus Vasa, The Deliverer of His Country* (London, 1739), vii, vi.



broader arrangement of historical texts.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, as a conjectural history, the "Essay" narrates a series of events that must have occurred in order for English drama to prosper in public settings. By littering the *Collection's* prefatory chronicle with anecdotes recounting fledgling efforts to ostracize medieval mummers from London, plebeian challenges to the patrons of Elizabethan acting companies, and futile attempts to suppress performances of morality plays, Dodsley chips away at the Licensing Act's power of stifling popular forms of entertainment.

Although neglecting to pay homage to his predecessors such as Robinson and Moseley, Dodsley does reveal that he based his undertaking on precedent. Drawing on the popular reception to Puritan pamphleteer William Prynne's infamous *Histrion-mastix*, "a heavy Load of dull Abuse, publish'd in 1633, against Plays, Players, and all who favour'd them," Dodsley recalls the moment when indigent seventeenth-century actors printed and circulated forgotten plays as a means of countering and undermining debasing criticism. "The best way the Parties concern'd thought of, in answer to this work," he continues, "was to publish all the best old Plays that could then be found; so that many that had never yet seen the Light, were now brought forth" (SC 1:xxxii–xxxiii). Although the accuracy of his account remains unverified,<sup>22</sup> he implies that Walpole's Stage

<sup>21</sup> Historians such as Mark Salber Phillips have largely recognized the ideological reconceptualization of such literary genres, suggesting that the endeavor to broaden the content and conventions of traditional historical writing—chronological narratives of national and state politics—to include social commentary, the arts, industry, and human interest, is often registered in the "minor" genres such as biography, the novel, and, as I would argue, the literary collection, all at "the margins of formal historiography" (*Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740–1820* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000], 15). This is not to suggest that all histories reject the conventions of formal historiography. In *The History of the London and Dublin Theatres, from the Year 1730 to the Present Time* (London, 1761–71), theater historian Benjamin Victor, for example, although seeking objectivity, may be accused of having "taken too great Liberty with the Characters of the Dead" but contends that "I am fully sensible of the Reasonableness of that Maxim, *De mortuis nil nisi bonum* [of the dead (say) nothing but good]; however, this must not extend to History, wherein, for a just Recital of Facts, the true and full Characters of the principal Agents are often requisite" (1:36–37).

<sup>22</sup> The earliest suggestion of disgruntled actors printing plays as a form of protest may be located in the preface to *The Works of Mr. Francis Beaumont, and Mr. John Fletcher* (London, 1711), where J. Sympon refers to Shirley's publication of Beaumont and Fletcher's *Comedies and Tragedies* in 1647: "This Collection was Published by Mr. Shirley after the shutting up of the Theatres, and Dedicated to the Earl of Pembroke by Ten of the most famous actors, who profess to have taken great Care in the Edition" (ii–iii).

Licensing Act is akin to Puritanical modes of censorship and resolutely challenges close scrutiny of legitimate dramatic performances by replicating this printing revolution against Prynne's hostilities. By "snatch[ing] some of the best Pieces of our old Dramatic Writers from total Neglect and Oblivion," Dodsley asserts that unregulated printing preserves the English institution of a free press (*SC* 1:xxxv).<sup>23</sup> His collection therefore establishes for its readers the idea that resisting and neutralizing anti-theatrical polemics is manifested in a literary tradition. At the same time, his imprecise recording of printing history suggests that he abandoned historical accuracy while contorting the myth of renegade actors/printers into a pedagogical tool advocating the perpetuation of an unpoliced theater. In his essay, the progress of English theater history struggles between the dynamics of liberty, which embodies the national interest, and faction, which embodies individual and partisan interest.

To his political mind, a most effective way to combat contemporary obstacles to unregulated performances entailed drawing from additional documented historical precedents echoing subtle, secret, or open resistance to attempts to achieve those ends.<sup>24</sup> According to Dodsley's account, the first details of anti-theatrical prejudice in England emerged with sanctions against the earliest acting troupes and the state's concern with the circulation of biblical interpretation. The first act of Parliament under Edward III ordained that strolling mummers performing mystery plays "should be whipt out of *London*, because they represented scandalous Things in little Alehouses, and other Places where the Populace assembled" (*SC* 1:ix). Despite legislation attempting to shield the public from exposure to sacrilegious interpretations of the scriptures, the mummers, "the true original Comedians of *England*," continued performing throughout England and

<sup>23</sup> The premise that the court should participate in every sphere of social and economic life actually faced a great deal of resistance. Still, many argued that the effect of regulating institutions such as the printing press and the theater was not completely undesirable: some believed that policing the press and stage ensured national security because these unregulated media provided a catalyst for an impending Jacobite rebellion, and others emphasized the risk of satirizing the monarch as a segue into a revival of pre-publication censorship. See Vincent J. Liesenfeld, *The Licensing Act of 1737* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 151–55.

<sup>24</sup> The impetus behind such experimentation with historical recording and interpretation appears to have emerged from at least two centuries of English historians and antiquaries beginning in the fourteenth century resolutely collecting artifacts—markers of heritage—identifying the nation's earliest achievements. See Joseph M. Levine, *Humanism and History: Studies in the Development of Modern British Historiography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 155.

the rest of Europe. Likewise, fourteenth-century scholars of St. Paul's and the Parish-Clerks of London and Clerkenwell often petitioned Richard II for laws prohibiting "some unexpert people" from performing fables from the Old Testament because of the risk of their misinterpreting the Catholic canon (SC 1:xii). As late as 1533, however, the "Partizans of the old Doctrines" chose to perform morality plays in their homes, thus resisting Henry VIII's proclamations forbidding Catholic performances (SC 1:xiv).

Yet although examples of clandestine performances of biblical doctrine introduce Dodsley's case for an unmonitored theater, he finds more relevant moments in narratives starring secular figures who confronted such hostilities. While addressing the magnitude of such defiance against laws forbidding the circulation of Catholicism through the early sixteenth century, in a rare moment of authorial intervention Dodsley dismisses the significance of mystery plays, which "only represented, in senseless manner, some miraculous History from the Old or New Testament." But their evolution into morality plays, although written during "the dead Sleep of the Muses," tags a new moment in the spectator's relationship with the text as a vehicle for circulating moral instruction, for in these plays "something of Design appear'd, a Fable and a Moral" (SC 1:xiii). At this point, it appears that Dodsley wags his finger at the theater's genuinely low former state and suggests that plays no longer warrant opprobrium or censorship as they began to intensify public morals; the plays in volume one—John Bale's *Tragedy or Interlude, New Custom: A Morality*, John Heywood's *The Four P's*, and Richard Edwards's *Damon and Pithias*—Dodsley displays "to show from what low Beginnings our Stage has arisen" (SC 1:2). Despite their relative futility in effecting theater reform, these plays anticipated an ideological transition, as "Religion then was every one's Concern. . . . Had they been in Use now, they would doubtless have turned as much upon Politicks" (SC 1:xiv). Because the plays of the Middle Ages privileged religious politics, he focused his energy on the secular ramifications of performance under the Tudors in order to progress away from the imperfections of the barbarous Middle Ages.

At the same time, the conjectural nature of Dodsley's argument defines not only the ideological divide between the religious and the secular preceding the Tudors. This speculation on the "doubtless" evolution of morality plays into political plays, coupled with Dodsley's rather cavalier

tone, indicates that the Tudor dynasty marks an era that finely adjusted the balance of power between monarchs and the lowest of actors. His invocation of this age through the collection of plays obscured by history contextualizes the state's compelling interest in guiding the theater as an institution based in morality and national significance. Dodsley's design of proffering a prominent tradition of old English drama to an audience interested in their national heritage emphasizes a chronological narrative of cultural growth, a sense of a national past and a national heritage.

As the contemplation of the events in England's theater history prompted further interrogation, Dodsley attempted to find in chronicles such as historian and antiquarian John Stow's *Survey of London* (1598) a succession of incendiary events to further explain the events of the present. Dodsley's dependence on this text for anecdotes recalling an Elizabethan theater built through insurgence stresses the continuum between past and present rebellion against anti-theatrical movements. While refraining from commenting on Stow's chronicle framed by London's history, Dodsley maneuvers strategically through this anti-theatrical rhetoric by accumulating evidence to sustain an unchecked theater. In an extensive quotation comprising more than four consecutive pages of Dodsley's "Essay," we discover that, for Stow, the playhouse served as a site of agitation especially for women and children, who "were inveigled and allur'd to private and unmeet Contracts." However, Stow continues, because acting companies and their patrons often ignored the order of London's Mayor Sir James Hawes to stop performing within the city limits without permission, "the lewd Matters of Plays encreas'd," which set in motion a complete suppression of performances because of perceived dangers to the state, religion, etiquette, and wellness. Although Elizabeth I lifted the ban and restricted performances only to the Queen's Players but forbade them on Sundays, holidays, and after sunset, "all these Prescriptions were not sufficient to keep [illegal acting troupes] within due Bounds, but their Plays so abusive oftentimes of Virtue, or particular Persons, gave great Offence" (SC 11:xxv-xxvii).

Against Stow's vilification of the chaotic Elizabethan theater and the fallout from resistance to state-mandated proclamations, Dodsley reconstructs Stow's interpretation of a public vulnerable to the depravity of performances and the mutinous actions of the nobility against the monarch. His movement toward an independent theater capitalizes on this

rancorous opposition to unlicensed performances—an open manipulation of a national institution—even if this strategy and rhetoric could not erase the reality that legal actions constantly plagued actors. By extensively reproducing Stow's anti-theatrical chronicles verbatim, Dodsley opens a window into its original author's and sixteenth-century London's sensibilities. At the same time, he exposes through this document a precedent to his own "short historical Essay," that is, a chronicle of failed legal attempts to prevent the staging of plays, thus revealing through historical reflections a consistent pattern of dramatic liberation.

Drawing from a second, more recent jeremiad on the loose structure and enforcement of anti-theatrical legislation, James Wright's *Historia Histrionica: An Historical Account of the English Stage* (1699), Dodsley finds a model of resistance that fortifies his argument encouraging the circumvention of persecution.<sup>25</sup> When *Historia Histrionica* appeared in 1699, it was straightforwardly situated amid the outpouring of replies to Anglican divine Jeremy Collier's *Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage* (1698), which charged the theater's most recent comedies with depravity and blasphemy. In Wright's response, the dialogue between the elder Trueman and his younger disciple Lovewit, we discover that despite various statutes prohibiting acting since Elizabeth I's criminalization of strolling players, only the two ordinances of the long parliament in 1647 completely suppressed the stage and acting. According to these statutes, "all stage-plays and interludes are absolutely forbid; the stages, seats, galleries, &c. to be pulled down; all players, tho' calling themselves the king or queen's servants, if convicted of acting within two months before such conviction, to be punished as rogues according to law." Still, in an arrogant proclamation of his own, Trueman quickly closes the dialogue by presuming that "no body pretends these things to be laws" (SC 11:xxxvii). For Trueman and presumably for Dodsley, the legalities remain unresolved, hovering between opposing cultural alternatives. Recontextualized in the supplemental eleventh volume of Dodsley's *Collection*, the text both contains an extended conjectural history and contributes to Dodsley's satire by tracing the origins of performance restraints to negligible anti-theatrical legislation. Although the playhouses

<sup>25</sup> *Historia Histrionica* prefaces the *Collection*'s eleventh volume under the title *A Dialogue on Plays and Players*.



closed, the nation witnessed the resilience of drama as playwrights continued to produce, clandestine performances persisted in hidden venues, and plays circulated as manuscripts despite the threat of legal ramifications. Trueman's reaction sets the terms for an acrimonious debate leading to the Licensing Act, and Dodsley's reliance on precedents set by monarchs who participated in entertainments establishes the necessity of overturning the legislation.

### \* Dodsley's Legacy \*

Through the medium of his *Collection*, Dodsley interpreted the Licensing Act as a state-sponsored endorsement of the atrocities and errors of past censorship laws summoned to legitimate that of the present. As the license to disapprove of plays without justification resonated through London's theaters, Dodsley challenged and subverted the existing structures of power through validating an enduring tradition of resistance packaged and circulated in a voluminous collection of plays. This collection as an historical site of resistance to the continuing battle over the closing of the playhouses reveals that literary artifacts are easily altered, withstand attrition, and remain accessible. In this respect, triggered by a concern for the protection of a legacy perceived to be disappearing under the weight of the Stage Licensing Act, Dodsley was galvanized into collecting dramatized artifacts, re-evaluating England's theater history, and releasing both to a broad, inquisitive reading public in order to publicly attack the bankruptcy of Walpole's statecraft with the full force of English national mythology. The persistent celebration of the unrivaled richness of the English dramatic tradition emphatically vindicates the claim to an expansive future for the republic of letters. Of course, because competing ideologies shape heritage in the futile quest for an unquestionably authentic past, friction often intensifies between the possible sources, purposes, and meanings of heritage. In other words, heritage is defined by the negotiations between the disparate forces and critical voices politicking to shape culture and arbitrate history. Dodsley's assurance about what constituted important information and how to circulate that information grew from familiarity with the political complexities of these spaces and of collections of plays published before his own. Such historical narratives



and icons allow aspects of the past to be represented and provide a forum for alternative history, knowledge of the past (accurate or not) based on the critical engagement with and mediation and interpretation of available sources and records. If Dodsley's history served as a catalyst within the theater culture of mid-eighteenth century—anticipating theater histories such as Thomas Dibdin's *A Complete History of the English Stage* (1797), Thomas Gilliland's *The Dramatic Mirror: Containing the History of the Stage, from the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (1808), and Charles Dibdin's *History and Illustrations of the London Theatres* (1826)—his own document too had a history in this oeuvre and the ideology to which he himself contributed.