GILLIAN RUSSELL

“Announcing each day the performances”: Playbills, Ephemerality, and Romantic Period Media/Theater History

OF THE DIVERSE RANGE OF PRINTED EPHEMERA IN LATE GEORGIAN BRITAIN, the playbill, with the significant exception of the lottery ticket, was the most ubiquitous. Its presence as part of a late Georgian media ecology is apparent in a comment made by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in a letter to Sara Hutchinson in 1802. Fancying himself as a stage manager of the deity’s theater of nature in the Lake District, Coleridge writes: “Blessings on the mountains! to the Eye & Ear they are always faithful. I have often thought of writing a Set of Play-bills for the vale of Keswick—for every day in the Year—announcing each Day the Performances by his Supreme Majesty’s Servants, Clouds, Waters, Sun, Moon, Stars, &c.”1 Coleridge imagines himself as a kind of diurnal historiographer, the playbill representing the possibility of inscribing and retaining traces of the constantly changing beauty of the natural “scene.” As stage manager of God’s theater of the world Coleridge not only exemplifies a Romantic poetics of ephemerality—which in its epistolary instantiation is itself to the moment—but also the embeddedness of such a poetics in the practices of collecting, as indicated by the fact that a file of playbills for the Keswick Theatre does in fact survive, in the playbill collections of the British Library.2 These playbills serve as a correlative of and also, we might say in their status as printed ephemera, an enabling condition of Coleridge’s theater historiography of the everyday natural world.

The playbill, which is of central significance to the history of Georgian ephemerology, thus deserves to be recognized as having a place in a cul-

tural history of Romantic textuality as a whole. Throughout her career Jane Moody was attentive to how the playbill could evoke the specificity in time and place of the performance event, vividly imagining, in *Illegitimate Theatre in London*, “many a spectator poring over the contents of a bill by the light of a candle in a gloomy rented two-pair back.” The playbill enunciated the play to be performed, the actors, the existence of the playhouse, and implicitly, a potential audience, while at the same time signifying dimensions of theater and theatricality beyond the specific performance event. This dual dimension of the playbill, I want to suggest, accounts for why Georgian men and women were attracted to it, why they collected it, and why, for such an apparently “ephemeral” document, so many playbills survive. I am interested in the playbill as an artifact of both the theater and Romantic print culture, a zone in which print textuality and theatricality are profoundly imbricated. The playbill can be said to make visible the performative aspects of print, specifically its embedded orality and ocularity—the appeal to both “the Eye & Ear”—that made Coleridge think that the playbill was an appropriate metaphor for the panorama of the vale of Keswick.

**Holding the Playbill to the Light**

The importance of the playbill in theatrical and urban culture dates from the early modern period, the records of the Stationers’ Company showing that a succession of printers were authorized to produce playbills from 1587 onwards. As well as being distributed within and around playhouses, these bills would have been posted on walls and doorways, amplifying the impact of the theater, as Tiffany Stern has argued, within the cityscape as a whole. No playbills survive from this period. It was in the eighteenth century, with the expansion of both the print trade and the theater that the playbill became widely used and also archived. The production of playbills was a significant dimension of the jobbing trade for printers, both in London and the provinces. Some of the major metropolitan theaters had their own in-house printing shops, while there was a close association between local 3. “Ephemeralogy” was the body of knowledge about quotidian life, associational culture, customs and amusements, the mundane and the marvellous, as documented in fugitive print and visual culture from the seventeenth century. See Gillian Russell, *The Ephemeral Eighteenth Century: Print, Sociability and the Cultures of Collecting*, forthcoming. 4. Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770—1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 154. See also Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 39–40. 5. Stern, *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); see also David Gowen, “Studies in the History and Function of the British Theatre Playbill and Programme 1654–1914” (D.Phil., University of Oxford, 1998).
print trades and theater in the provinces, particularly after the boom in theater building caused by changes in the regulation of the theater in 1788. In many cases these booksellers, who printed and disseminated playbills and related textual paraphernalia such as tickets, were also publishers of local newspapers in which performances were advertised, reinforcing the association between theater and local print. We know of the value of this trade to the booksellers Jasper Sprange in Tunbridge Wells and the Soulbys in Bridgnorth because they included their playbills as part of a documentation of their output, kept in scrapbooks, which functioned as both an advertisement to potential customers and a personal archive. Sprange, for example, produced playbills, tickets (for the theater, concerts, and the local turnpike gates), various kinds of handbill notices, shop bills, and book catalogues and prospectuses. Such collections are important for contextualizing playbills as part of the diversity of jobbing print as a whole.

One of the ways in which the Georgian playgoer encountered the playbill was as a large or "great" bill stuck on walls, doorways and shopwindows in the vicinity of the playhouse and often printed in vivid red and black to attract the attention of patrons. In Thomas Holcroft's Hugh Trevor, for example, the eponymous hero sees a crowd gathered outside Drury Lane theatre: "The play bills were pasted in large letters, red and black, against the walls. I read them, and their contents told me it was one of my most favourite tragedies, Rowe's Fair Penitent, and that Mrs. Siddons was to act." But by far the most widespread and enduring form of theatre publicity until the early nineteenth century was the smaller handbill form of the playbill, sold both outside and inside the playhouse. The bill-seller, often a woman, was the first point of contact with the theater, informing the audience of what they were about to see and contributing to the sense of anticipation and excitement that defined the occasion. In 1830 Leigh Hunt


claimed that “without a play-bill, no true play-goer can be comfortable,” declaring his “respect for the common ‘house-bill,’” associated with the cry of “‘bill o’ the play.”"10 There was thus a performative dimension to playbill publicity, as was also the case in the country where strolling players would announce their arrival by sounding a drum and proclaiming the coming entertainments.

The information conveyed by the playbill remained standard until the early nineteenth century. It told the reader where and when a performance was taking place, the sequence of the entertainments in the evening’s “whole show,” and the list of performers. Ticket prices for particular sections of the house would be indicated and there were also directions as to where the tickets could be obtained, such as the theater itself, the lodgings of the performers, or the printer of the bill. Playbills therefore encoded the semantic richness of the event they were advertising, situating a particular performance of a play in relation to others in the collective experience of theatergoers, what Jacky Bratton terms “intertheatricality.”11 The playbill was also capable of facilitating and documenting varieties of parasociability surrounding the main sociability of the performance event itself and its relationship to other similar experiences—what might be called “intersociability.” Even those playgoers who read the playbill casually or quickly discarded it were inevitably participating in this collective social experience. The conventional phrases of the playbill such as “By permission of,” “Theatre −,” “tickets to be had of,” or “vivant rex and regina” were expressions of both the uniqueness of the performance advertised and simultaneously its embeddedness in what was already known, while the titles of the plays functioned as dramatic microtexts in their own right.12 The communicative power and attraction of letters on playbills as visual graphic signs were a print culture correlative of the theater’s emphasis on seeing. This transmedial tendency extended to the status of the playbill as performance text in its own right, one that was “cried up” outside the theater. The playbill thus reliably appealed, as Coleridge thought the show of nature did, to both “Eye & Ear.” Moreover, as a text which had the potential to survive the event it advertised, the playbill served as a way of commemorating and preserving the ephemerality of performance, creating a sense of periodicity and thereby a form of theater time. Georgian playbills enabled the recovery of the immediacy of a particular performance, the sense of it as being yet to come, as not yet having become history.

The playbill was also notable for its fugitive tendencies. Lending itself to both designed and accidental readings in all kinds of spaces, it theatricalized the agentic capacity of printed ephemera to escape immobilization or fixity. In the form of the poster affixed to walls the playbill was static, but as the “house-bill” it was mobile and portable, picked up from the bill-seller on the way into the theater or from the orange-girl inside. It was customary for playbills to be pinned to cushions, in order to render them immobile and potential objects of display (as well as reserving the playgoer’s place). In one of the poems in James and Horace Smith’s *The Rejected Addresses*, such a playbill, “reft of pin,” escapes from its place high up in the playhouse, to the delight of the audience: “Like Icarus, while laughing galleries clap, / Soars, ducks, and dives in air the printed scrap.”

This capacity for flight meant that the playbill was a familiar sight beyond the immediate environs of the theater. In the 1790s, while on a walking tour, the Cambridge clergyman James Plumptre “espied” a playbill advertising Shakespeare’s *Richard III* and *The Agreeable Surprise* by John O’Keeffe on an “inn window shutter” in the village of Kibworth, deep in the English midlands, indicating how far both ephemeral print and theater had penetrated the material environment of eighteenth-century Britain. The ubiquity and relative cheapness of the playbill—bought for a penny at the theater, viewed on walls or on doorways, or retrieved from rubbish in the streets—meant that it and other similar texts could be the instruments in an informal education, potentially open to everyone. The Victorian laboring class poet Joseph Skipsey, for example, “taught himself to read and write from discarded playbills and advertisements.” In his autobiography Robert Southey recounted how as a small boy in the late 1770s and 80s he spent a number of years in the care of his theater-mad aunt Elizabeth Tyler, who lived independently in Bath and had connections with the Bath theater. She “preserved the playbills” which formed the materials by which Southey learned to read and form his letters: “I was encouraged to prick them with a pin, letter by letter. . . . I learnt to do it with great precision, pricking the larger types by their outlines, so that when they were held up to the window they were bordered with spots of light. . . . I have done it

14. [Horace and James Smith], *Rejected Addresses, or the New Theatrum Poetarum*, 7th ed. (London: Miller and Ballantyne, 1812), 106.
to hundreds; and yet I can well remember the sort of dissatisfied and damp­
ing feeling, which the sight of one of those bills would give me, a day or
two after it had been finished and laid by. It was like an illumination when
half the lamps are gone out.”

Southey was practicing on the playbill a par­
ticular form of close reading, a reinscription of the power of this kind of
text to evoke the ephemerality of the event it was advertising. His tracing
of the letters with a pin and then holding it up to light created a new
thing of beauty, his own private theater.

Dead Walls

In the early nineteenth century, the playbill and indeed jobbing print as a
whole underwent a significant technological change due to the introduc­
tion of new forms of typeface: fat face, developed by Robert Thorne in
1803, Egyptians in 1815, and then sans serif in 1816. These typefaces were
bigger and bolder, making them more visible from a distance than the neo­
classical and old face types that had been the norm: according to John
Lewis, “the appearance of bills and posters, labels, letterheads, tickets and
other kinds of ephemeral printing changed completely.”

Maurice Rick­

ards notes the suddenness of the change: “not only was this the biggest
thing to hit printing for some three hundred years, it was also the quickest.
Printers who had been sedately chugging along with their book-style lay­
outs suddenly found a whole new typographic world.”

After 1803 play­
bills became more elaborate, making a verbal and visual assault upon the at­
tention of the playgoer: twenty years later the Examiner noted “how the
large type staggers under the weight of so much gorgeous announcement,
which naturally enough requires the aid of letters an inch long.”

Increasingly also, the visual effect of bold and dramatic display type was combined
with description, woodcuts, and other forms of illustration, making the
playbill both a dramatic text in its own right, for which specialist writers
were needed, and a form of street art. By the mid nineteenth century the
use of colored paper for such posters meant that they competed with gas
lighting in their capacity to illuminate the cityscape. In 1851 a writer for
Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine recalled posters for entertainments at Vauxhall as
“colossal words of fire . . . oracular announcements” that “flamed from a
background of the blackest wood.” These flaming letters seared the writer’s
childhood imagination: “the Vauxhall alphabet of fire struck us as the ef­

17. Southey, Life and Correspondence, ed. C. C. Southey, 6 vols (London: Longman,
Brown, Green & Longmans, 1849), 1:72–73.
1973), 10.
fect of enchantment. By this excellent mode of inculcating the first rudiments of education we learned our earliest lessons in orthography. . . . The play-bills of Astley's are also inscribed upon the tablet of our memory. They are so many sheets of heraldry; the vignettes of pageantry."\(^{21}\)

The typographic revolution, of which the magnification of the playbill was the epitome, is important for Romantic media history in a number of ways that have gone unnoticed by literary and book historians. As early as 1805 William Wordsworth had identified their impact on the cityscape of London in Book 7 of _The Prelude:_

Here files of ballads dangle from dead walls,  
Advertisements of giant-size from high  
Press forward in all colours on the sight:  
These, bold in conscious merit, lower down,  
That, fronted with a most imposing word,  
Is peradventure one in masquerade.\(^{22}\)

A "dead" wall was one unbroken by a door or a window: it could mark the boundary between a road or pathway and adjacent ground such as a park or a back yard. In the rapidly transforming London of the early nineteenth century there were many such "dead walls" in all parts of Westminster and the city, including at Hyde Park and Buckingham House. Outside the surveillance of a property owner or householder and in the absence of a police force, the dead wall was a recognized "no man's land," a site of anonymous inscription, transient commerce (including prostitution), and of cheap and jobbing print. Signwriters would advertise goods and services on dead walls which were also used for political graffiti, particularly in the 1790s when both seditious and loyalist "Lucubrations" were scrawled across them.\(^{23}\) Dead walls were the venue for the publication of political handbills, the _Morning Chronicle_ ironically recommending the dead wall of the British Museum as a "fund of public information."\(^{24}\) They were also places where retail cheap print was traded. A mid nineteenth-century account of "low life" in London described how the ballad seller would "take his stand against a dead wall . . . first festooning it liberally with twine" and pinning up "two thousand ballads for public perusal and selection." This writer claimed that the heyday for this practice was the early nineteenth century before "dead-walls gave place to shop-fronts" about twenty years

23. _Morning Post_ 16 December 1794.  
24. _Morning Chronicle_ 18 January 1793.
before (i.e. the 1830s): “we are old enough to remember the day when a
good half-mile of wall fluttered with the minstrelsy of war and love . . .
along the south side of Oxford Street alone.” In addition to cheap print
the dead wall was also the site of improvised, transient commerce, bric-a-brac, fruit and flowers displayed one day and gone the next, leaving “not a
vestige of all this life and traffic—nothing but a void area and a veritable
Dead Wall.”

The dead wall was therefore a paradigmatic site of ephemerality and ins-
cription in the late Georgian and Victorian city, the place at which the tide
of commerce, including print culture and writing itself, washed up against
the shores of obsolescence and loss. Moreover, the dead wall was to be
found throughout London rather than just at its suburban margins: it was a
reminder that everywhere the metropolis was constantly dying and rein-
venting itself. In relation to print, the “dead walls” of The Prelude suggest
how the typographic revolution of the early nineteenth century had made
ephemeral print pressing, “bold” and visually overwhelming as well as
emphatically out of doors, a concretely material phenomenon. Retail
cheap print in the form of ballads dangling in files is associated or “filed”
in Wordsworth’s poem with lurid advertisements and the latter’s literary
prostitution—the bill in “masquerade” possibly referring, as John Barrell
suggests, to the radical mock playbills of the 1790s.

Wordsworth’s acknowledgment of the “dead wall” of ephemerality and
in particular the typographic revolution that transformed jobbing print re-
lates to how Book 7 as a whole is concerned with innovations in media
around 1800—visual entertainments such as the panorama and the rise of
intermedial genres such as melodrama—changes which implicitly included
the status of poetry itself as a “medium.” John Guillory has observed that
what a medium does is to make something “visible that before could not
be seen,” primarily through remediation: “the first truly major practice of
remediation” was “the invention of printing, which reproduced the con-
tent of manuscript writing at the same time that it opened up new possibil-
ties for writing in the print medium.” As a form of mimesis, poetry (like
storymaking and drama) belonged to both “before” and “after” print,
meaning not simply a distinction between orality and print literacy but

25. Charles Manby Smith, The Little World of London: or, Pictures in Little of London Life
27. Barrell, “Radicalism, Visual Culture, and Spectacle in the 1790s,” Romanticism on the
ysis and history of files see Cornelia Vismann, Files: Law and Media Technology, trans. Geoffrey
writing and speech" before print, and "writing, speech, and print" after print. Celeste Langan and Maureen N. McLane have argued that the Romantic period is crucial in the evolution of poetry from a literary kind to a medium that would be able to compete with and exceed the power of the printed word and the visual media: the origins of poetry "in the far, oral past ensured that poetry, unlike, for example, the novel, had a stronger claim to be considered a supermedial, transhistorical venture: it had preceded writing, preceded print, and could indeed outlast them." Romantic poetry produced what Langan terms, adapting Friedrich Kittler, an "audiovisual hallucination" whereby the techniques of print communication—the reading of printed lines of poetry on a page or in a book—became so deeply naturalized that experiences could be imaginatively "heard" and "seen," the artifactuality of poetry as print becoming an invisible blank screen. Such reading practices—silent and internalized—confirmed the "'lesson' of literacy. . .: content is not a substance, but rather the production through reading of an interior, of (literate) subjectivity as a virtual space modeled on the page." Romantic poetry was thus able to refashion or modernize itself as a supermedium in its capacity to render an impression of an unmediated aesthetic experience. This process exploited the materiality of print as well as being dependent on the increasing invisibility of that materiality and was foundational for not only Romantic poetry, as Langan and McLane suggest, but also imaginative literature in general.

Book 7 of *The Prelude* is consistent with this account of the emergence after 1750 of poetry as a supermedium in its evocation of fugitive textuality and its implications for the status of the word as part of a rapidly transforming media landscape, both real and virtual, around 1800. However, what is being remediated to make visible Wordsworth's poem as a "supermedium" is not the ballad as a trace of orality "before print" (the ur-literacy of modern literary culture) but the ballad as the product of retail cheap print, contextualized in relation to jobbing print as a whole, such as "advertisements of giant size." The orality to which the retail ballad and ephemeral print in general gave access was the orality of the modern everyday, the hubbub of myriad speech acts and communicative exchanges that such forms of print had made visible since the seventeenth century. Wordsworth's remediation of the materiality of ephemera and ephemerality in general in *The Prelude* was therefore designed to assimilate to the medium.


of poetry the poetics of everyday sociality represented by forms of printed ephemera and spaces such as the dead wall (part of the project of Romantic poetry as a whole to make lyric capital out of mundane, transient, ordinary things). The dead wall, moreover, represents the specific terms of the change in ephemeral print whereby innovations in type had transformed the letter and the word into flaming, “giant” visual artifacts. This change represented an echo (or remediation) of the pre-print status of the word as a predominantly vertical inscription on walls, monuments and gravestones, the dead wall, as we have seen, also being a site for graffiti and sign-writing. Whether consciously or not, Wordsworth can be said to have recognized changes in the typography of ephemeral print as signifying a possible dissociation of the power of the word from the book: just when poetry was sublimating the materiality of print, ephemerality was also escaping a relationship with the scale of the page and the codex form of the book to perform its own form of remediation of the origins of writing “before print.”

These changes represented an intramedial shift that had implications for the history of printed ephemera as a whole. Though the handbill endured as an important ephemeral format well into the nineteenth century, the association between printed ephemera and the book represented by the handbill’s size, its typeface, and its intimate, somatic connection with hands and bodies gradually diminished. The poster and advertising signage in general came to characterize the landscape of urban modernity. This development represented a shift in the cultural politics of ephemerality as it increasingly created a distinction between textuality out of doors and that within, hitherto a boundary that the handbill could always easily cross, carried as it was by people across thresholds for both inside and outside reading. A poster on a wall, however, was more immediately striking as a visual artifact and also less mobile and malleable than a handbill. It was more limited in its fugacity and ultimately more ephemeral, as posters on walls were quickly pasted over or decayed and could not be retrieved and reworked.


Technological change to typefaces therefore reinforced the tendency toward the estrangement of printed ephemera from the book in the early 1800s. The very act of rendering the poster horizontal, taking it away from the verticality of the dead wall through practices of collection or description in a book, was an interpretative gesture that countered the poster's apparent alienation of the printed word from the domain of the codex form of the book: Wordsworth himself can be said to be doing something similar in remediating ephemerality through the medium of poetry, by making the files of a ballad singer and giant advertisements a “book” to be read and handled within the leaves of the “book” of The Prelude. In its capacity to evoke a poetics of the everyday, fugitive print therefore constituted a resource for Romantic poetry, as well as being something which “literature” had to disavow, not only because of printed ephemera’s association with waste and impermanence but also because it represented the “flaming” visibility of a textuality that was increasingly no longer bounded by the limits of the codex or the page.

The playbill was not only in the vanguard of the typographic revolution of the early 1800s but also served as an object of reflection on that change. The lawyer and dramatic critic Thomas Noon Talfourd, for example, complained in 1821 about the “elaborate audacity” of modern playbills, contrasting them with the “classical simplicity, which once so well became them.” “With what sensations,” Talfourd wrote, “did we once look on a play-bill of the time of Garrick, announcing the great actor himself for Macbeth on ‘that present evening!’ How did he and all his fellows seem to be even then tasting and diffusing the rarest pleasure, and all the fine atmosphere of town gaiety to be breathing around us?”33 A better known testimony to an affective attachment to the playbill is Charles Lamb’s recollection in an essay published in 1822 of “the casual sight of an old Play Bill . . . picked up the other day—I know not by what chance it was preserved so long.” This chance survivor, advertising a performance of Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night at Drury Lane thirty two years previously, that is around 1790, evoked for Lamb in 1822 the importance of the reading of the playbill as part of the sociable ritual of playgoing: “There is something very touching in these old remembrances. They make us think how we once used to read a Play Bill . . . spelling out every name, down to the very mutes and servants of the scene. . . . ‘Orsino, by Mr. Barrymore.’—What a full Shakspearian sound it carries! How fresh to memory arise the image, and the memory, of the gentle actor!”34 Lamb’s reference to “spelling out

33. Talfourd, New Monthly Magazine 3 (1821): 162, 163.
every name," like an incantation, echoes how the young Southey learnt his letters. It also suggests that ephemeral print, particularly its handbill form, was the basis of alternative reading practices—oral, collective, and spatially unconfined (Lamb's sounding out of names implicitly being possible in the theater, the street, or at home), reading which, in the case of Robert Southey's childhood experience, entailed forms of theatricalized reinscription or remaking. These practices counter the idea of reading as being predominantly internalized, individualized, and silent, which underpins Celeste Langan's account of how poetry came to operate as a medium in the Romantic period. At the very least they suggest that the dematerialization of the book as material object and the "audiovisual hallucinations" associated with the reading of imaginative literature did not define reading in general, and the externalized, sociable, and performative forms of reading could also have affective meanings that were capable of shaping the Romantic subject.

Garnering the Playbill

Such commentaries not only made the playbill visible as a medium, charging it with affective significance, but also drew attention to collecting practices as a form of mediation. Thus Robert Southey's playbill education was made possible through his aunt's preservation of the playbills of the Bath theater, while Thomas Noon Talfourd noted the importance of a collection of playbills "as the most precious of literary curiosities—as forming a series of golden links in a chain of delight." Such a collection, he claimed, brought back "a thousand crowding recollections of heartiest enjoyment . . . awakening a kind of antique sympathy with the living joys of those, who now can laugh and weep no longer."35 Charles Lamb's encounter with his old playbill is an example of accidental reading, the lack of specificity as to where, how, and when he made a "casual sight" of it accentuating the document's ephemerality and miraculous, agentic survival. In this respect Lamb's playbill is similar to the one "espied" in 1790 by James Plumptre on the inn window shutter in Kibworth. It was partly for the very experience of such accidental readings that Plumptre was making his tour, which combined visits of churches and country houses with play-going and the pursuit of traces of theatrical performances in the form of playbills. Unable to stay in Kibworth for the advertised performance of Richard iii, Plumptre collected two playbills as souvenirs (leaving the one on the inn window shutter to flutter in the wind and decay) and subsequently went to the nearby town of Market Harborough to buy some "old bills" from the printer who worked for the company that was performing

at Kibworth (the kind of jobbing printer who, like Jasper Sprange, may have been keeping his own scrapbook of playbills). When he later visited Shakespeare’s birthplace of Stratford-upon-Avon, he went to the printers to get “as many Playbills as I could” and after a personal tour of the theater in Worcester “obtain’d a few playbills from the man who shew’d me the House.”\textsuperscript{36} Plumptre was exactly the kind of “theatric tourist” that James Winston would appeal to in his book of the same name, published in 1805, a collection of illustrations and accompanying accounts of playhouses in Britain that Winston originally designed as a periodical.\textsuperscript{37} Plumptre’s journal shows that his theatric tourism was combined with a form of media tourism (comparable indeed to Wordsworth’s imaginative “collecting” of the ballads and advertisements on the walls of London as recalled in The Prelude).

As an enthusiast for the theater, Plumptre is likely to have been aware that he was not alone as a playbill collector.\textsuperscript{38} An archival resource for playbills, as I have suggested previously, was the printing trade, to which Kibworth turned in his travels. Another repository was the acting profession itself. Theaters of all kinds, ranging from the huge metropolitan establishments of Covent Garden and Drury Lane to playhouses in the provinces, kept files of playbills as a form of corporate memory. Playbills were the only means, apart from newspapers, of keeping a formal printed record of a theater’s repertory, enabling managers and performers to track what had been performed, when, and by whom. It is to this practice that Coleridge was referring when he imagined himself writing and archiving the diurnal record of the natural theatre of Keswick. The vulnerability of theaters to such accidents led many actors and actresses to make personal collections, focusing not only on their own careers but also on the drama and theater more broadly. Notable playbill collectors included the actor John Philip Kemble, who in 1820 sold his collection of old plays and bills to the Duke of Devonshire for the enormous sum of £2000, and the comedian Charles Mathews who not only amassed his own collection of playbills but also bought up those made by other performers, including a fifty-five volume collection of Covent Garden and Drury Lane bills from 1774 to 1830, compiled by the actor John Fawcett and his father.\textsuperscript{39}

Playbill collecting and transmission, linked with realia such as costumes,
could thus serve as a vehicle for intergenerational memory and genealogy formation for actors. Mathews was reputed to have given five pounds to an impoverished fellow actor who had found “two or three letters” of Richard Brinsley Sheridan in a “heap of MS., sold to a cheesemonger as waste-paper,” accidental reading being the occasion for both the honoring of Sheridan’s memory and an act of charity to a fellow performer. Mathews’s home in Islington, where his collection was housed in a special room, became well known as an informal museum of the theater, which people could visit and socialize with each other. Another informal “theater museum” was the Garrick Club, founded in 1831, which became a repository for paintings collected by Mathews, and the archive of James Winston, perhaps the most significant collector of playbills from within the theatrical profession. When Winston died in 1843, the Gentleman’s Magazine noted that he had “enjoyed opportunities for making a vast collection of dramatic information and curiosities, and sedulously availed himself of the power. His masses of playbills, correspondence, rare pieces, pictures, anecdotes, biographies, and other matters, from the merest odds and ends to the most curious and interesting documents, form an extraordinary accumulation.”

Playbill collecting was not confined to the theater profession but after 1750 was a constitutive, even dominant, aspect of the wider documentation of contemporary social life, an important dimension of what Marilyn Butler terms “popular antiquarianism”—the study of vernacular customs, language, and literature, both of the past and of the present. One such collector, Sarah Sophia Banks, specialized in a particular dimension of theatrical culture—elite private theatricals—and the private theater was also the focus of her contemporary Daniel Lysons, who compiled a five volume collection of materials relating to the theater as part of his collecting project as a whole. His “Collectanea Dramatica,” described as “MATCHLESS” by the 1828 Catalogue for the sale of his library, consisted of “a Selection from the Newspapers, Play Bills, (many of them very rare,) &c. &c. Chronologically arranged, with Manuscript Notes . . . a complete Index to each volume, and the sources from which every article is taken pointed out.” The earliest record of theatrical activity that Lysons included in the

collection was from the *Perfect Diurnal of Proceedings* of 11 October 1647, thereby defining the history of theater in terms of the media history of the seventeenth century.\(^{45}\) The 1820s were a particularly fertile decade for such interests as some notable collections, beginning with those of Kemble, came on the market. One such collection was that of the antiquarian John Field, whose library of Shakespearean first folios and other rarities, such as a copy of Ben Jonson's *Sejanus* signed by the author, also contained numerous playbills; the 1827 sale catalogue advertised it as “the largest Collection of PLAY BILLS ever submitted to Public Notice.” The first item in the section of the catalogue devoted to playbills was a compilation of single sheet editions of the *Spectator*, “the original Edition as it appeared in Daily Papers,” a note claiming that “[b]esides other advertisements, these Papers contain the PLAY BILLS of the day.”\(^{46}\) As in the placing of the *Perfect Diurnal of Proceedings* at the head of Lysons’s collection, the *Spectator* volume in the Field sale catalogue implicitly aligned theater history with the history of print media. The Field sale had in total twenty-eight lots of playbills of theaters in London (both major and minor theaters) and the provinces, and also of “Places of Minor Amusement” such as “Sadler’s Wells, Vauxhall, Bartholomew and Southwark Fairs, Tottenham Court, Tony Aston’s Exhibition, Punch’s Theatre, &c.”\(^{47}\)

The playbill thus became a major focus of ephemera collecting in the late Georgian period, enabling by the 1820s the specialization in such material by “theatrical collectors” such as John Field and Charles Mathews. At the same time, the playbill remained an integral part of more generalist collecting practices that situated the theater as part of associational culture as a whole. A notable example of such a collector was the bibliographer and antiquary Joseph Haslewood, a founding member of the Roxburghe Club, a society of bibliophiles the name of which commemorated the record-breaking sale in 1812 of the Valdarfer Boccaccio which had belonged to the Duke of Roxburghe. After his death in 1833, Haslewood became notorious for his manuscript account of the convivial excesses of the Roxburghe Club, entitled *Roxburghe Revels*, which was bought in a sale of his library and later published, provoking attacks in *The Athenaeum* that contributed to the stigmatizing of both his reputation and that of the “bibliomania.”\(^{48}\) The full extent of Haslewood’s bibliographical curiosity, includ-

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46. *Bibliotheca Histrionica. A Catalogue of the Theatrical and Miscellaneous Library of Mr. John Field* (London: Sotheby, 1827), title page, 68. (The copy of the catalogue in the Bodleian Library indicates that this file was bought by Charles Mathews).

47. *Bibliotheca Histrionica*, 70.

ing the fateful MS. of Roxburghe Revels, was disclosed in the 1833 catalogue of the sale of his library, which shows him to be a collector of advertisements, ballads and broadsides, penny histories, proclamations, and autographs. Haslewood's ephemera interests were, however, dominated by the theater, suggesting that like Mathews, he moved between theatrical, antiquarian and literary circles. His library included a twenty-eight-volume collection of dramatic tracts, described in the catalogue as a “most curious and extensive assemblage,” and multiple volumes of playbills, including one set devoted to “Private Performances [and] Provincial Theatres,” as well as a nine-volume collection entitled “Plays, Players and Playhouses.”

Haslewood’s MS. preface to the collection claimed that it was designed as material for an unrealized “History of the English Theatre in London” and that it was drawn from “very promiscuous, very extensive, and very uncommon” sources such as “rare old publications” and “things fallen into desuetude.”

Haslewood’s career suggests that the expansion of book knowledge around 1800 and the rise of bibliomania—what Jon Klancher terms “wild bibliography”—had its correlative in a fascination for printed ephemera, for “things fallen into desuetude.” As Kristian Jensen has brilliantly explored, bibliography and literary culture in general were transformed by the effects of first the French Revolution and later the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, which emptied the libraries of aristocrats and religious foundations across Europe of incunabula. The traffic in such material across Europe represented a decontextualization and desacralization of incunabula and their transformation into luxury goods or art objects. In other words, old books had become fugitive, no longer fixed in the contexts that had defined them as stable and enduring for centuries, with implications for the status of the codex form of the book. The traffic in incunabula and the commodity fetishism of bibliomania entailed the supplanting of the book’s association with religion and rank by the ideology of the market and the necessity for more inclusive criteria of value that would enable these
books to function properly as commodities: according to Jensen, “for things to gain value in the market they must be identifiable as belonging to a class of objects, but they must also be distinguishable within the class. There is no market for an unidentifiable mass of material.” Jensen argues that in order to make such distinctions a new “object-based discipline” emerged after 1789, influenced by philology, antiquarianism, and historiography, particularly printing history, and conducted outside the established centers of learning. It is at this point that the earliest forms of ephemera begin to be sought after by collectors, the most prominent bibliophile of the period, Earl Spencer, buying three “scraps of vellum” in 1800–1801, “indulgences, items for which there had been no market until then.” This development illustrates how revolution and war after 1789 had profoundly relativizing effects on the spectrum of print. On the one hand, they granted a new visibility to the ephemeral text as a potential object of value because the most prestigious sacral books had become displaced, fugitive, subject to appropriation and in some cases purgative recontextualization—all books were in a sense now “ephemeral”—and on the other, they reinforced ephemerality as a way of defining the limits of value in the market economy of print, particularly the boundary of the “unidentifiable mass of material” that is not commodifiable. Thus the bibliomaniac and the ephemeronophile were not necessarily antithetical but were important to each other and in the case of Haslewood and numerous other book collectors of the period these identities were embodied in a single individual. Haslewood’s career in particular illustrates the synthesis of philology, antiquarianism, and historiography underpinning the “object-based discipline” of Romantic textual materialism that Jensen identifies, to which I would also add the constitutive importance of ephemerology.

The late Georgian period was therefore one of tremendous archival energy in relation to ephemerality, in which the playbill was central. “Extraordinary accumulations” of playbills were made, preserved, circulated and deposited, not only in the metropolis but also throughout Britain. In 1946, *Notes and Queries* published “a census of extant collections of English provincial playbills” of the eighteenth century, noting that while some had been destroyed in the Second World War “very little” had actually “perished as a result of air-raids.” (Even more than the survival of books, the endurance of an apparently ephemeral text such as a Georgian playbill

would have been particularly evocative in 1946). These indomitable collections included fourteen volumes of playbills documenting theatricals in Whitby between 1779 and 1819, donated to the Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society by the local postmaster, Richard Rodgers, and the six thousand bills in the Library of the Dean and Chapter of York Minster, recording performances in the circuit of York, Leeds, Doncaster, Pontefract, and Wakefield and probably originally compiled in part by the theater manager Tate Wilkinson. The collection was bequeathed to York Minster, together with other books and ephemeral material relating to York, by the antiquarian and bibliophile Edward Hailstone (1818–90). Commenting on this archive and the curiosity of its consignment to an institution, the Church, which was traditionally opposed to the theater (though the association of the ephemeral text with incunabula is consistent with the development outlined by Jensen), Jane Moody notes that “[w]hat was ubiquitous is now singular; what circulated freely around the urban spaces of the city has become a forlorn document encased in an antiseptic plastic wrapper.” Moody also comments that it is “tempting” to “fall into the narrative of loss which . . . somehow pervades theatre historiography despite the material richness of the archive.” As she emphasizes, Georgian playbills are not really so “forlorn,” but persist in a collective “material richness,” the endurance and formative contexts of which deserve to be recognized as a counternarrative to that which emphasizes printed ephemera’s singularity and disappearance from history. Even those playbill collections that were not secured by the processes of archivization, are not truly “lost” because their existence as an archive, if only in its most transient, ephemeral form and through the mediation of autobiography and fiction, was nevertheless documented. The playbill’s cheapness, the fact that it could be acquired for free as rubbish on the street or torn from a wall, and its ease of storage, made it easier to collect and preserve than a library of books. Ephemerophilia could thus be practiced by both the rich and the poor. One collector in the 1890s claimed that he had been given many of his playbills by working-class people: “Many of these old bills had lain for years and years carefully stowed away under the work-bench in the manufactory, or in a well-guarded drawer in the not too well equipped home. . . . ‘I’ve never been able to afford pictures,’ said one worn-out old


fellow, as, with trembling hand, he pressed his little bundle upon me, ‘but my playbills has been pictures to me as long as I remember.’" The history of the playbill is told not only by what survives in libraries today but also by these still evocative traces of collecting practices.

Perhaps the most striking examples of the material richness of the late Georgian playbill archive, apart from Winston’s “extraordinary accumulations” now disseminated across the globe, are the playbill collections of the British Library. At the center of those collections are the files made by Charles Burney Jr., the brother of the novelist Frances Burney. Like Haslewood, Burney combined the identities of book lover and ephemerophile. He gained notoriety and caused enduring damage to his career when he was expelled from Cambridge in 1777 after stealing books from the University Library. He was also a lifelong collector of newspapers and playbills, the latter as a basis for an unrealized history of the British theater and in particular of the actor-manager David Garrick. The file of Keswick playbills was part of this collection. Burney’s library, including a collection of theatrical portraits, now in the Department of Prints and Drawings, was bought by the British Museum in 1821, three years after it acquired Sarah Sophia Banks’s collections. Together, Burney’s newspapers and playbills and Banks’s collections, foundational in the development of the British Museum and Library, constitute the most comprehensive documentation of polite life and associational culture that had hitherto been made in world history. While it is tempting to regard Charles Burney’s collecting of playbills as a failed project in theater history or biography, such a view obscures the connection between his collecting of newspapers and playbills. The newspaper was another way in which playbills were published and circulated in similar formats and contexts. Considered in its totality, Burney’s collecting can be seen as an attempt to capture, as it was happening, the immediacy and complexity of the daily traffic of Georgian society’s information networks. It is not accidental that first-level playbill collectors were printers, postmasters such as Rodgers in Whitby, coffeehouse owners, and theater managers, men and women who were themselves nodes in such networks, who handled and facilitated the flows of paper of which the playbill was only one stream. While important in the documentation of

contemporary theater, the playbill was therefore also an important part of a wider archiving of the print media and its relationship to quotidian, associational life. Men such as Burney and women such as Southey’s aunt Tyler were thus as much media as they were theater historians.

In her discussion of James Winston’s archive of the late Georgian theater, Jacky Bratton notes how he seemed to collect “everything—the death of a long-serving dresser alongside Sheridan’s receipts for his fire insurance premium and a newspaper biography of Thomas Holcroft; ephemera like bills for goods or services and tickets are pasted in, or sometimes described or copied. . . .” Bratton adds that Winston “seems to have been the kind of man for whom the computer database would have been a perfect tool, or rather, perhaps, an end in itself.” The activities of men such as Winston were regarded, Bratton argues, as a primitive antiquarianism, superseded after the 1830s by more “scientific” and literary models of theater historiography that rejected the gathering together of mere fact and anecdote in favor of a synthesizing analysis based on rigorous principles of textual criticism. This development led ultimately to a theater historiography dominated by the idea of the decline of the dramatic genius represented by Shakespeare, the superiority of the closet over the stage, and the stigmatization of spectacle as popular mass (or ephemeral) entertainment. It resulted in what Bratton describes as the discrediting and defeat of histories of theater such as John Genest’s 10-volume *Some Account of the English Stage, from the Restoration in 1660 to 1830*, published in Bath in 1832. Genest was a retired clergyman who, like James Plumptre, had an avid interest in the theater. His book is an annual register of theatrical performances in London, Bath, and Dublin, ranging from the patent theaters to fairground booths, combined with opinion and analysis. Genest’s history would not have been possible without the playbill and the history of playbill collecting after the mid eighteenth century. Indeed, his reliance on the playbill was so transparent that a later commentary, published in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1851, was able to envisage Genest at work as a diurnal historiographer: “Doubtless his playbills came down by the post to Bath . . . every morning, and he looked, and he extracted, and he filed.”

Genest acknowledged his indebtedness to the playbill by giving an account of the Field sale in 1827, revealing himself to be a buyer, via the bookseller Thomas Rodd, of many of its volumes. Distinguishing between what he calls “real” playbills and advertisements for performances cut out of newspapers, Genest notes the price he paid and the value of collections

such as that for Drury Lane, Goodman’s Fields, and the Haymarket for 1733–34: “the Hay. Bills proved of great importance to me.” Genest also noted various lots of playbills that had been sold to other people, including Charles Mathews, suggesting that he owned an annotated copy of the catalogue of the Field sale. In its permeability to the materiality of the playbill and the playbill as a mode of archivization, as well as to the ephemeral genre of the sale catalogue, Genest’s theater history showed its affinities with the loose, expansive bookmaking of collectors such as Haslewood or Winston, practices that could accommodate tickets or insurance receipts. His account of “Mr. Field’s Sale,” included in his chronicle of events of 1827 rather than as an appendix, acknowledged the materiality of his own history and its open transparency to archival sources. It grants the playbill collection a topological status within his own text as a form of accreted knowledge that had moved between many hands before it reached him and would presumably move again.

Digitization, as Bratton suggests in her comparison of Winston’s archive with a computer database, enables us to see the playbill and other similar kinds of texts, such as the ticket, as a form of data storage and the practice of collecting as, in Walter Benjamin’s terms, a mode of “actualization” based on that data. Rather than viewing projects such as Winston’s (and also Burney’s and Haslewood’s) as failed histories, why not consider them as indeed ends in themselves? Genest’s model of a capacious or fugitive theater history was later stigmatized as “bill-sticking history” that was too invested in the ephemeral. Bratton claims that “anecdote, inherited wisdom, professional interest in the box office—all the material and emotional heritage of the stage—was viewed merely as the context which helped (or more often hindered) the realization of the written dramatic text” (my emphasis). In other words, “all the material and emotional heritage of the stage” was increasingly rendered as ephemeral, and the privileging of the written dramatic text was predicated on texts such as the playbill being defined in this way. Playbills were thus only explicitly labelled as ephemera later in the nineteenth century, one periodical writer claiming in 1871: “it is in the nature of such ephemera of the printing press to live their short hour, and disappear, with exceeding suddenness. . . . They have served

63. John Genest, *Some Account of the English Stage, from the Restoration in 1660 to 1830*, vol. 9 (Bath: H. E. Carrington, 1832), 406.
66. *Fraser’s Magazine* 2 (January 1831): 736, as part of a commentary on James Boaden’s biography of Dorothy Jordan.
their turn, and there is an end of them. . . . The demands of 'waste' must be met: fires must be lighted."68 The perishability of the playbill (and the kind of knowledge associated with it) was thus necessary to defining how theater, for all its reliance on the ephemeral, could possibly transcend time through its importance to national literary heritage, embodied above all in the genius of Shakespeare.

One consequence of the disciplinization of theater history as a branch of arts and sciences, crossing the domains of literary studies and history, was that its embeddedness in popular antiquarianism as a form of ephemeral media history that implicitly related theater to associational culture was eventually forgotten. Theater history in Britain, as Bratton suggests, is an early enlightenment phenomenon: it began with James Wright's *Histrio Histrionica* (1699) and John Downes's *Roscius Anglicanus* (1708) and was thus linked with the wider documentation of contemporary public culture as a result of the expansion of the print media in this period. Considered within the context of ephemera collecting, the history of the Georgian theater looks very different, that is, as primarily driven by media change, the theater's own investments in the evanescence of the performance event, and accidental and inevitable loss being translatable to ephemeral print's capacity to mark time and vice versa. Collectors of ephemera were able to document such investments, situating theater as part of a wider media ecology and traffic in sociability, constructing histories that, because they tended towards the encyclopedic, could accommodate theater in all its diversity, including unacceptable or illegitimate forms. In a preface to his collection "Of Plays, Players and Playhouses," Joseph Haslewood claimed that if the public patronized entertainments such as rope-dancers and performing monkeys, "it may be expected the readers of a future day will be eager to have some information of such inconsequential diversions . . . as well as the slip slop of times past. . . . to give a general history there must be a description of all the machinery and which is indispensable to render it any way perfect."69 It was thus the duty of the collector-historian to record such performances, a catholicity that is also reflected in the scope of other collections that placed together or consigned the theater of Garrick with that of the fairground. Part of the process of cultural distinction underpinning the development of theater history as a discipline in the nineteenth century was the exclusion or ephemeralization of the "slip slop" of the theater as a worthy object of inquiry. This process entailed the estrangement of theater itself, now reified as an art form, from its relationship with other forms of entertainment and sociability, such as pleasure and tea gardens, assembly rooms, exhibitions, ballooning, and so on.

Ephemerality was not only deployed as a criterion of distinction in a Bourdieuvian sense, whereby the field of theater knowledge was reconfigured, but was also used to define the rhythms of media shift, particularly the sense of print as becoming too much. The commentary on Genest's *Some Account of the English Stage* published in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1851 claimed that his kind of history was no longer possible due to the proliferation of playhouses after the relaxation in 1843 of the licensing laws that regulated the theater. In the 1850s there were now simply too many theaters and too many playbills. "[H]ow could [Genest] possibly have taken in every bill of every establishment? What room in his house, what house in his row, would have held them all? ...? Had he attempted to publish them or their contents, however condensed, how many volumes would he have filled, even at this short march from 1830? If endowed with the spirit of an ancient philosopher, he would have burned himself on a blazing pyre of playbills, just as Empedocles sought death in the crater of Etna."70 The acquisition of ephemeral knowledge, in the form of an excess of paper information, conceived topologically as a room crammed with stuff, was by 1851 a shameful, embarrassing practice: it was the abyss against which history had to define itself. Theater history would have to bury its origins in such practices and in the history of associational culture as a whole, disavowing its continual reliance on what Jane Moody termed the material richness of its archive because the playbill was "ephemeral" and thus singularly pathetic and "forlorn," incapable of authorizing proper knowledge. However, if the nexus between theatrical culture and ephemeral print was increasingly untenable by the 1850s, such a development enables us to recognize what had been possible before that date. Between the seventeenth century and the mid nineteenth century the full spectrum of the paper economy, particularly forms such as the newspaper, the handbill, and the ticket, were recognized as being capable of mediating the fleetingness of social experience, thereby making ephemera visible as a medium and the collecting of that medium a mode of history making. The Romantic period is notable as the period when the mediality of printed ephemera is recognized as being capable of constituting or, in Wordsworth's case, of being remediated, as a poetics. In envisaging himself as a writer of playbills and God's theater manager, Coleridge was expressing the power of ephemerality as a way of apprehending or actualizing the "thisness" or haecceity of time: as the *New Monthly Magazine* writer said of John Genest: one could "look," "file," and "extract," and the momentariness of experience might still be there.

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