

Jonathan Mulrooney, *Romanticism and Theatrical Experience: Kean, Hazlitt, and Keats in the Age of Theatrical News*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 275. £75. ISBN 9781107183872.

Although the notion of theatre as metaphor for urban life – the ‘raree-show’ of the seventh book of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, say, or the ‘endless phantasmagoria’ of William Hazlitt’s essay ‘On Londoners and Country People’ – is commonplace to students of Romanticism, the new insistence of this book is the extent to which the experience of theatre may be more literally identified with the experience of the city in the Romantic era. Contributing to the growing attention to sociality in the era, for some time now the benign alternative to past ideological critiques of Romantic isolationism, Jonathan Mulrooney puts theatre at the heart of his version of Romantic sociality. His contentions, in related succession, are as follows: that the explosion of theatre-related print media in the Romantic era extended the reach of theatrical experience beyond the audiences in the playhouse, making such experience more central to public life and communal awareness than has so far been acknowledged; that the literary practice of the later Romantic writers, particularly the urban Romantics, Hazlitt and John Keats, was crucially shaped by their theatrical experience, especially of Edmund Kean; and most ambitiously, that on the basis of the ‘case studies’ of Hazlitt and Keats, we may assert the centrality of theatrical experience to Romantic literature more generally.

The narrative of the book is sequential and developmental. Part I is a comprehensive overview, reversing the usual transition from page to stage to track instead the opposite movement, where the staged performance is amplified by its anticipations and afterlives in textual form, in advertisements, reports and reviews. Surveying the ubiquitous presence of theatre in the daily press and the contribution of theatre-centred periodicals to the development and influence of a growing reviewing culture, as well as attending to the particular impact of the Old Price riots of 1809, this part culminates with the role of Leigh and John Hunt’s *Examiner* in countervailing a dominant commercialism by promoting the imaginative over the consumerist aspects of theatrical experience.

On this scene Kean emerges as a theatrical phenomenon at the beginning of Part II. The well-known facts of Kean’s class background and the innovations of his acting style, particularly its departure from Kemble’s, are adduced in the characterization of a dynamic performer, whose reception was closely bound up with his personal notoriety. By unsettling the distinctions of public and private, and with them, those of class and gender, and so undercutting the conventional authority of Kemble’s interpretations, particularly of Shakespeare, Kean revolutionised theatrical experience. For Hazlitt, Kean was the exemplary subject, whose expression of lived experience catalysed the development of his own identity as a sociable writer, binding a community of readers to the particular and the experiential. Committed to the specificities of the occasion, ‘Hazlitt’s review criticism is both the symptom of and the cure for [...] [the] characteristically Romantic fracture of elitist and mass culture’ (162), and this ‘occasionalism’ generated in time the conversational style of his later essays. The keynote of the chapters on Kean and Hazlitt, that theatre undermined the class assumptions upon which cultural authority was premised – or elided the separation of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture – continues to be sounded in the book’s final chapter, to my mind its strongest, on Keats. Tutored in his view of Kean by Hazlitt, Keats identifies with the actor in his own attitude to ‘aesthetic experience as a [...] negotiation that treated the high culture of art and the low culture of daily life with equal force and attention’ (194). Mulrooney’s corrective, adding to those that have accrued over the years, to Marjorie Levinson’s narrowly classist reading of Keats is especially welcome and salutary. The resistance to the categories of ‘high’ and ‘low’ that Keats (via Hazlitt) found in Kean is illustrated by detailed close readings, most notably of the ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’. In this chapter, as throughout the book, the emphasis is on the

artistic performance as process, eschewing the stasis of the finished product. Mulrooney's thesis is that a commitment – here read in class terms – to concrete particulars and lived experience in the creation and reception of art entails the refusal of an elitist mode of cultural mastery. Theatre provides for the expression of that refusal, on stage, in criticism, and in poetry.

Mulrooney writes with conviction, and his argument contributes usefully to current trends in both theatre studies and Romantic-era scholarship. Sometimes, perhaps, especially in Part II, its reiteration feels a little one-dimensional. Kean's celebrity, for instance, tends to predominate over his acting. Or more substantially, the accent on Hazlitt's occasionalism occludes his ambivalence about immediacy (most memorably expressed in 'On the Look of a Gentleman') and his larger metaphysical resistance to the tyranny of the present. Such provisos, however, in no way detract from the insights of *Romanticism and Theatrical Experience* in fusing so persuasively theatre and text in the Romantic era.

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