# Chapter Nine

# The Changing Theatrical Economy:

## Charles Dibdin the Younger at Sadler's Wells, 1814–19

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Charles Isaac Mungo Dibdin (Charles the Younger) managed and wrote for Sadler's Wells Theatre between 1800 and 1819. He was the eldest son of Charles Dibdin and Harriet Pitt, an actress. His brother, Thomas Dibdin, would also make a name for himself as an actor, playwright, and manager, as discussed by Jim Davis in the following chapter. In the early nineteenth century, frequent comparisons were made between the careers of Charles Dibdin the Elder and his two sons, who despite enjoying professional successes in their own right, were generally compared to their father at a disadvantage (their illegitimacy – as children born out of wedlock – seemingly reflected in their perceived failure to match his achievements).

This chapter focuses on Charles the Younger's final years as manager of Sadler's Wells—a remote venue known as 'the country theatre', whose location in Islington meant that there was 'scarcely a House' nearby until the late 1810s.[1] But Sadler's Wells was also one of London's oldest and most successful minor theatres. Charles the Younger was its manager for nineteen years and six months but left reluctantly thereafter, bitterly reflecting that although the theatre had been his 'pet child', 'pet children do not always turn out the most filially

affectionate' (*Memoirs*, 125). By examining the possible reasons for his withdrawal, this chapter begins to identify the pressures attendant upon the theatrical economy during the early decades of the nineteenth century. It focuses on the range of topical entertainments presented at Sadler's Wells after the proclamation of peace on 20 June 1814 (the date Charles the Younger singles out in his *Memoirs* as marking the beginning of his theatre's decline) and 12 April 1819 (the start of his final season as manager). From this opening consideration of the generically heterogeneous performances at Sadler's Wells, the chapter then turns to Charles the Younger's *Young Arthur; or, The Child of Mystery: A Metrical Romance* (London, 1819), which it reads as another index of the changes to the cultural economy of the early nineteenth century. This chapter thus aims to add its own inflections to the political, aesthetic, and commercial questions raised by other contributors to this volume, and implicitly to provide a longer chronological perspective from which to view the career of Charles Dibdin the Elder.

**Sadler's Wells Postwar**

Charles the Younger took up management of Sadler's Wells Theatre in 1800: two years later he and Thomas Dibdin became shareholders (his brother investing £1,400 in the purchase of a quarter-share).[2] In 1804 a water tank sourced from the nearby New River was installed on stage, and another smaller tank placed within the roof, to enable waterfall effects. *The Siege of Gibraltar* (1804) was the first production to benefit from these innovations. This nationalist entertainment, complete with ships built to scale by shipwrights from the Woolwich dockyard and the engagement of young boy actors to sustain the illusion of distance, represented such a departure from usual staging practices that Charles the Younger confidently described his '*coup d'oeil*' as a spectacular '*coup de theatre*' (*Memoirs*, 62). Charles the Younger was here building

upon the 'innovative, varied, entertaining' programme that Michael Burden, in tracing Charles the Elder's fortunes at the Royal Circus in Chapter 3, has defined as foundational to the success of the minor theatres.[3] But whereas Charles the Elder would be most readily remembered for his sea songs, Charles the Younger would win renown for his staging of sea battles: thanks to its water tanks, Sadler's Wells became adept at reproducing, in the words of Jane Moody, 'an aquatic theatre of war' that enticed audiences from all parts of the city.[4]

In the years after the Napoleonic Wars, Sadler's Wells was, however, a theatre in decline. Postwar economic and social distress reduced the demand for theatregoing more generally, while the establishment of new London theatres, such as the Coburg, which opened on 11 May 1818, made the situation even worse. The fierce competition between the old and new minor theatres put direct pressure, for instance, on Thomas Dibdin's management of the Surrey.[5] At Sadler's Wells, the situation was further complicated by a series of internal problems. By the late 1810s, audiences had become over-familiar with the effects of the main water tank; contractual disputes resulted in the absence of the hitherto regular performer Joseph Grimaldi—the celebrated Clown of English pantomime—for the entire 1817–18 season; while changes to the theatre's managerial hierarchy fostered feelings of resentment and alienation. It is interesting, therefore, that in his *Memoirs*, Charles the Younger should have allowed so much to rest upon his belief that 'theatres (in London, at least) prosper most during War'. 'It is a fact', he laments, 'that immediately previous to the short Peace of Amiens, Sadler's Wells was crowded every night; but as soon as the Peace was announced, our receipts suddenly fell off to a very serious degree, and continued in that reduced state, till the war recommenced, and then they recovered their former amount' (*Memoirs*, 119). Although he goes on to concede that 'many reasons have been given for such occurrences', his analysis ends here, lest it fail to appear 'thoroughly intelligible to others', and

because he remains uncertain as to 'whether or no it is worth enquiring into at all' (119). While Charles the Younger identifies a sharp decline in profits during the fourteen months that marked the Peace of Amiens, he describes, significantly, only a gradual declension in theatrical fortunes following Napoleon's abdication (119).

Indeed, the years 1814 to 1817 were far from complete failures: Sadler's Wells still made a profit and several new entertainments attracted public notice. These included Charles the Younger's aquatic dramas *The Two Caliphs; or, The Genii of the Waters* (11 April 1814) and *The Corsair* (18 July 1814). The latter boasted especially impressive scenic effects; its finale re-enacting 'a conflagration' of the Castle of Seyd that, being reflected upon the water, 'made the whole Stage appear as if it were on fire' (*Memoirs*, 109).[6] Based on Byron's bestselling poem, Charles the Younger's *The Corsair* partook of what would become an especially voguish trend in the late 1810s and 1820s—the adaptation of popular poems and novels for the stage. Byron's oriental poem had been an immediate bestseller and would, in fact, prove to be one of the most successful individual long poems of the Romantic period (enjoying sales of an estimated 25,000 copies; whereas, by comparison, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, A Romaunt* (1812) sold approximately 13,750 copies).[7] Adaptations would also characterize the repertoire at the Adelphi (formerly Sans Pareil) Theatre, which responded to popular demand for 'The Great Unknown' with *Ivanhoe; or, The Saxon Chief* (27 January 1820) and *Kenilworth* (8 February 1821), and at the Royal Circus, where Thomas Dibdin produced stage versions of Walter Scott's *Montrose* and *The Bride of Lammermoor* less than a fortnight after their publication.[8]

These stage adaptations tended to be only loosely based upon the original literary texts; *The Corsair* was no exception, with Charles the Younger's desire to play to the strengths of his company and provide a more arresting finale resulting in significant deviations from his source

narrative. His 1817 production of *The Gheber; or, The Fire Worshippers* took similar liberties with Thomas Moore's *Lallah Rookh*, another bestseller. Orientalism was by then a recognizable feature of the dramatic repertoire, both patent and minor. As Daniel O'Quinn has convincingly argued, eighteenth-century representations of Islamic society on the London stages tended to be strongly politicized—a means, especially, of testing 'the limits of monarchical power'.[9] Within this context, O'Quinn describes Charles Dibdin the Elder's and Edward Thompson's *The Seraglio* (Covent Garden, 1776) as a play 'obsessed with the space of the harem first as a site of sexual fantasy and second as a symptom of political lassitude'.[10] Claire Mabilat's distinction between exoticism as 'an artistic tool' and orientalism as a concept charged with defined 'cultural and/or political agendas' is thus particularly useful.[11] At Sadler's Wells, exoticism and orientalism tended to be equally present in entertainments that had clearly been written to capitalize upon the theatre's capacity for impressive stage effects, but that also sought to go beyond the spectacular by tapping into the public's wider curiosity for Eastern customs and politics.

**The Exoticized City**

At Sadler's Wells, so pronounced was the demand for spectacular effect that the theatre's main scene painters, Luke Clint and Robert Andrews, struggled to keep up. In 1814 they were joined by John Henderson Grieve, who also worked as a scene painter for Covent Garden.[12] Both pantomimes of the 1815–16 season—*Mermaid; or, Harlequin Pearl Diver* (27 March 1815) and *Harlequin Brilliant; or, The Clown's Capers* (3 July 1815)—and the revived aqua-drama of *Kaloc; or, The Slave Pirate* (first staged in 1813) called for impressive backdrops. Indeed, so complex were the scene changes for *Harlequin Brilliant* that Charles the Younger inserted two

songs between scenes thirteen and fourteen, in order to buy time for the technicians to realize the elaborate transformation of the 'Pavilion at Brighton' to a scene set 'on real water' depicting the launch of HMS *Britannia* from a British dockyard.[13] The fact that this was not even the pantomime's concluding scene is all the more significant in light of David Mayer's salient reminder that at Sadler's Wells special effects tended to be reserved for the grand finale.[14] While other theatres such as Drury Lane necessarily compensated for the absence of a strong Clown by investing heavily in scenic effect, Grimaldi's regular engagement at Sadler's Wells meant that its pantomimes could privilege the harlequinade's characteristic chase and pursuit. But by 1815 spectacle was such an integral part of the theatrical experience that not even the pantomimes at Sadler's Wells dared to minimize it. Not all audience members of the minor theatres were fully literate, but the entertainments on offer catered to degrees of visual and musical literacy that offered important compensation for this.

A surviving scene book, detailing the various set designs that Andrews, Grieve, and Clint produced for Sadler's Wells, testifies to a commitment to scenic novelty across the genres.[15] The book includes seven scenes from the melodrama *Iwanowna; or, The Maid of Moscow* (13 May 1815), which required the collaboration of the three principal artists for the recreation of extravagant indoor and outdoor spaces. In preparation for the finale, Andrews constructed 'A Setting Scene. Transparent Back'd Working Roller Behind Burning Moscow' (no. 34) whose effects Charles the Younger would recall as nothing short of 'electrical' (*Memoirs*, 116). The play then concluded in a 'superb hall' (no. 41), also prominently advertised in the playbills. The scene book's inclusion of only a partial sketch of the hall suggests that this final scene alone consisted of various intricately linked parts.

The Sadler's Wells scene book captures what Shearer West describes as 'a changing professional art world . . . that saw the evolution of painting from trade to a liberal art, while scientific advances provided opportunities for new experimentation with scenic effect'.[16] It also helps us identify specific geographies of production and reception since, intriguingly, some of the designs for the theatre's most elaborate pantomimes imply an interest in redirecting the gaze from scenes of foreign splendour to the capital's more familiar topography. The pantomime *Mermaid*, for instance, included a panoramic view of the New River Reservoir and Sadler's Wells itself as a main scene.[17] The following season's Easter pantomime *London and Paris; or, Harlequin Traveller* (15 April 1816) took this even further by contrasting in 'alternation, the most attractive and popular scenes, and views, in each of these cities, and in their respective environs', as Charles the Younger proudly outlines in his *Memoirs* (116).

As the Continent reopened for travel, verisimilitude rose high on the artistic agenda. Stuart Semmel details how, in the aftermath of Waterloo, 'thousands of Britons found themselves confronted with material vestiges of Napoleon's fallen empire. They encountered portable momentos [*sic*]: teeth, bullets, the carriage of Bonaparte himself'[18]—in short, miscellaneous relics of war that were sourced in Belgium and subsequently showcased in English private homes and public spaces, such as the Egyptian Hall (where Napoleon's carriage went on display in the first week of January 1816), the Waterloo Museum in Pall Mall, and the nearby Waterloo Exhibition and Waterloo Rooms.[19] The entertainments at Sadler's Wells at once registered and reacted against these different kinds of postwar spectacles. After 1815, Charles the Younger and his team of artists would have been fully aware that audiences not only sought pleasure from, but actively scrutinized, the scenic transformations enacted by Harlequin's magic sword or bat. In the Sadler's Wells scene book, the use of paper flaps (as illustrated below)

permitted individual scenes from *London and Paris* to be superimposed by as many as two or three others. It provides a compelling record of the harlequinade's movement between parallel sites in Paris and London, such as the Hôtel des Invalides, Chelsea Hospital, and Greenwich (no. 25; Fig. 9.1), or the Hôtel des Monnaies and Bank of England (no. 26).

**[Insert Figures 9.1, 9.2, and 9.3]**

By the 1820s, pantomimes would rely ever more heavily on the three-dimensional scenic model provided by the diorama. As Mayer explains, this aimed in large part to compensate for the decline of the harlequinade following Grimaldi's reduced appearances on stage, as a result of his deteriorating health, and official retirement in 1823.[20] What is interesting about a pantomime such as *London and Paris* is that it suggests that in the 1810s tentative moves were already being made towards the kind of scenic narrative embodied by the diorama—even at Sadler's Wells, during a period when it was still known as Grimaldi's 'home'. *London and Paris* suggests, furthermore, that while representations of Paris clearly constituted a principal attraction for postwar audiences, the English capital was recognized as an 'exotic' site in its own right. The pantomime depended, after all, upon scenes presented in alternation, rather than consecutive sequences focused on any one locale. This structuring lends weight to what James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin have called the phenomenon of the 'eidometropolis', borrowing the title of Thomas Girton's 1802 pictorial representation of London to describe how the Romantic city became a form of panoramic spectacle.[21]

The exoticization of London included, significantly, an interest in the minor theatres' specific localization within it. This was neatly exemplified by the competing responses to the first London performances of Mozart's opera, *Don Giovanni*. As Moyra Haslett notes, in early 1818 'the [Don Juan] legend's monopoly of the theatres was complete' with 'six different

productions playing simultaneously in the capital'.[22] These included the Royal Circus's burlesque, *Don Giovanni; or, A Spectacle on Horseback!* (26 May 1817), which enjoyed more than one hundred performances,[23] and the Olympic Theatre's *Don Giovanni in London*, which had premiered on 26 December 1817. The latter exploited advances in lighting techniques that promised not only visually impressive but also satirically incisive representations of an assemblage of places within the capital. These were listed on the playbills as: 'St Giles's (by gas light)', 'Westminster Hall (in a new light)', 'Interior of the King's Bench (in its true light)', 'Exterior of the Insolvent Court (by sky light)', 'Charing Cross (by a blue light)', and Drury Lane's 'Grand Saloon (by a fan light)'.[24] Meanwhile, the Royal Circus's playbills stated that Thomas Dibdin's production of *Don Giovanni* would include scenes in or near Seville but also '(by way of a Pictorial Episode) a fine scene of Blackfriars Bridge taken in the Circus'.[25] In the earlier pantomime of *The Dog and Duck; or, Harlequin in the Obelisk* (1816) the Circus had already presented a variety of new London scenes, including a 'View from the Obelisk, looking towards the Surrey Theatre' and the 'Interior of the Royal Circus'.[26] This fascination for the sites of London attests to a modern understanding of the metropolis as 'at once capital to the provinces and point of contact with the wider world' that was enhanced by the minor theatres' self-reflexive strategy of specifically locating themselves within the cityscape.[27]

In December 1821 the Coburg would take such autoethnography to its extreme by installing a much-advertised '*looking glass*': a 'mirror curtain', consisting of sixty-three glass panels, by which audiences could see their own reflections on stage.[28] This innovation, although dismissed by some reviewers as nothing more than 'a gewgaw', proved decisive in drawing in the crowds.[29] In her analysis of the ways in which the minor theatres worked to 'construe a new cultural metropolis', Moody argues that the mirror curtain's resemblance to the plate-glass

windows found in contemporary shopping arcades marked 'a significant step in the transformation of the dramatic spectator into the self-conscious purchaser of cultural goods and visual pleasures'.[30] I would like to underline Moody's stress on 'transformation', not least because the spectacle offered at the Coburg was, in fact, curiously discontinuous.

According to contemporary commentators, not only were the curtain's individual plates quite dull, but 'owing to the numerous divisions in the glass, the whole *contour* of the scene [was] broken and disjointed'.[31] In the 1835 series 'London Letters to Country Cousins' (published in *The Court Magazine and Belle Assemblée*) the curtain thus serves as a metaphor for the creative memory:

> [T]he whole formed, not a mirror, but a multiplication table…putting the head of one person upon the shoulders of another – transferring the plumed bonnet of a third to the bald pate of her next male neighbour – lifting the dirty apprentice out of the back row of the pit into the dress circle – and, in fact, confounding objects, looks, and localities, in a manner amusing enough to the beholder, much more so perhaps, than if it had presented a perfect picture of the scene before it.[32]

In keeping with the letter's light-hearted tone, these incongruous images are initially characterised by nothing more than slapstick comedy; but they soon acquire patently political implications, as highlighted by the imaginative transposal of the 'dirty apprentice' across the socially-tiered auditorium. It is significant that by the time of the letter's publication, the Coburg's mirror curtain had been pulled down (in recognition of the safety issues associated with its sheer weight). The letter's nostalgic tone nevertheless provides a valuable reminder that while the mirror curtain did indeed attract bad press, audiences at large seem to have been much more generous in their responses. As memorialised by the letter's fictive author 'Terence Templeton',

the mirror curtain provided an effective act drop precisely because of its flaws. Failing to deliver 'a perfect picture', the curtain's discordant reflections prompted theatregoers to engage in exercises of self-identification and reinvention that ranged from the playful to the ambitious; and which, by extension, may ultimately have encouraged the Coburg's patrons to recognise and assume their own agency in an ever more aggressive capitalist economy.

**Politics**

The symbolic advantages of placing the minor theatres at the heart of the metropolitan experience were, therefore, not only aesthetic and commercial, but also pointedly political. As E.P. Thompson notes, radicalism in the capital 'assumed more conscious, organized, and sophisticated forms' after 1815.[33] The district of Islington, moreover, was well known for its strong radical sympathies—a fact Charles the Younger had to negotiate with care when devising new entertainments for Sadler's Wells.[34] In her discussion of Jane Scott's postwar productions at the Sans Pareil, Jacky Bratton concedes that 'there can be, of course, no possibility that the authorities would have overlooked any overtly political play staged in London at this time' but, as she concludes, that is not to say that political meanings could not be 'adduced'.[35]

The pantomimes for which Sadler's Wells enjoyed such high renown may have offered only passing references to the political issues of the day, but the ever more impressive stage effects that made the city at once familiar and strange encouraged audiences to align their seasonal favourites with the orientalist entertainments that already enjoyed a long association with critiques of governance. By enhancing the harlequinade through visual effects, the artistic team at Sadler's Wells helped realize the potential for what Mayer refers to as the 'retributive comedy' inherent to that part of the pantomime's action.[36] The harlequinade, which sees the

lovers attempt to escape from authority, constitutes the all-important second half of the pantomime. This follows the 'transformation scene', in which a benevolent agent transforms the principal characters of the opening fable into the comic types of Harlequin, Columbine, Pantaloon, and Clown.[37] The subsequent action is fast-paced and spectacular; Harlequin's magic bat giving him the power to confuse his adversaries by realizing a metamorphosis of the scenes and objects they encounter during their journey. In the pantomime *Harlequin's Vision; or, The Feast of the Statue* (Drury Lane, 26 December 1817) this included 'the transformation of a chest into a sofa, on which the Clown seats himself, and which is immediately afterwards converted into a kitchen-grate, with a fire briskly burning in it, and which gives the Clown an unpleasing hint, *a posteriori*'.[38] 'Lissom as a cane, and furnishing all that little supply of conscious power which a nervous mind requires, and which is the secret of all button-pulling, switch-carrying, seal-twirling and glove-twirling', Leigh Hunt insisted that Harlequin's magic sword was perfect for the delivery of 'satirical strokes'. 'We always think, when we see it', he continued, 'what precious thumps we should like to give some persons,—that is to say, provided we could forget our own infirmities for the occasion'.[39] Although Charles the Younger's greatest successes in the years 1800 to 1815 could broadly be described as 'patriotic' entertainments that celebrated the heroism of British soldiers and sailors, Harlequin's silent but energetic stage presence was, by Hunt's colourful description, exceptionally enabling; allowing audiences to imagine 'what supplement they please to the mute caricature before them'.[40] While I do not want to claim that the pantomimes staged at Sadler's Wells were, in themselves, of an oppositional, much less a 'radical' nature, I do want to suggest that Charles the Younger might, like his father, be best understood as an 'independent loyalist', to borrow the term defined by David Kennerley in his contribution to this volume.[41]

The desire at once to mobilize but also to nuance loyalist opinion (as described in more detail, below, with reference to *Young Arthur*) was fraught with challenges. Spikes in unemployment, crime, and vagrancy rates, combined with industrial depression and poor harvests, meant that in the autumn of 1816 conditions in London were ripe for the Spa Field Riots. Although the riots concluded in something of an anti-climax that demonstrated the lack of coherence within the radical movement and ultimately helped middle-class reformers cement a distinction between radical and moderate sympathies,[42] even this was not enough to forestall a government clampdown. In line with the repressive measures enforced in the 1790s, Habeas Corpus was suspended on 1 July 1817 and the Seditious Meetings Act reinstated. The minor theatres had survived the surveillance culture of the late eighteenth century and would do so again; but managers would need to exercise stringent assessments of the kinds of performances on offer.

During the Napoleonic Wars topicality had been at the top of Charles the Younger's agenda. In 1813, for example, he produced 'two military and musical mélanges' (*Memoirs*, 107) in celebration of the success enjoyed by British arms in the Iberian Peninsula: *Vittoria; or, Wellington's Laurels* and *The Battle of Salamanca*. This preference for military entertainments continued in the postwar years, as exemplified by the already mentioned Russian-themed melodrama *Iwanowna*, and the musical piece *Forget-me-not; or, The Flower of Waterloo* (1817). Interestingly, although both these entertainments were already relatively dated by the time of their premiere, their very 'belatedness' seems to have carried emotive charge; the 'extremely pleasing' qualities of *Forget-me-not*, for instance, were explicitly linked to its 'various popular old airs'.[43] By 1817 the recourse to familiar tunes was a tried and tested practice for Charles the Younger, who frequently set new songs to existing music or mixed well-known lyrics with his

own. As Mark Philp suggests, this could help encourage identification with new causes, framing musical performances as 'multi-layered processes of ideological contestation and confrontation'.[44] Charles the Younger's decision to extend his wartime repertoire past 1815 may therefore also be indicative of a belief that the war's heroes had yet to be satisfactorily rewarded.

**Internal strife**

The start of the 1817–18 season at Sadler's Wells also entailed practical challenges related to theatrical personnel and machinery. Although the *British Stage* eagerly awaited the theatre's reopening, confident that Sadler's Wells' advantageous vicinity to the New River and Grimaldi's popularity as the 'prince of Clowns' were virtual guarantors of success, 1817 would be remembered as one of the theatre's worst years on record.[45] Charles the Younger painfully observed that 'we wound up our accounts *minus*' for the first time since 1800 (*Memoirs*, 121)—in no small part because this was 'the only Season the Theatre opened without [Grimaldi]' (119).[46] It took time for Grimaldi's replacement, 'Signor Paulo' (the stage name of Paulo Redigé the Younger), to win over the crowds.[47] Many of the pantomime songs were suited to Grimaldi alone: Charles the Younger explains that 'when writing them, I had in view much more his peculiarities of what I may call, expression, than any literary fame' (113). As Jim Davis shows in Chapter 10, this collaborative method of authorship and dramatic production was an approach also pursued by Charles the Younger's brother Thomas and numerous other dramatists in this period. As a result, therefore, of the absence of Grimaldi from the Sadler's Wells company, the pantomimes in which Paulo featured were even more reliant on special effects. Evidence of this takes tangible form in the playbills advertising Sadler's Wells' 1817 pantomime, *April Fools!*

*Or, Months and Mummery*, which included a scene-by-scene full 'Prospectus of the Pantomime' overleaf.

Yet by 1817, Sadler's Wells' spectacular repertoire was beginning to feel decidedly tired. Even the water tanks had lost their novelty. As Charles the Younger explained:

> The body of water had become not only familiar, but *caviare*, from the familiarity; in addition to which, the public had become in a great degree, conversant with the modes and mediums in and through which we effected our aquatic *surprises*, and hence they excited neither astonishment, nor delight; again, I had exhausted all my inventive fancy, as regarded producing novelties, in the water Scene; and every artist in the Theatre had exhausted his [.] (*Memoirs*, 120–21).

Not even promises of 'ample remuneration' proved sufficient to excite new ideas for the water tanks' use, while John Astley's investment in a reservoir for his Amphitheatre meant that their very uniqueness was under threat, as Charles the Younger confided in a letter to Lloyd Baker dated 22 December 1817.[48] Water spectacles would continue to define the theatre's repertoire in the 1820s, but the final years of Charles the Younger's management were marked, as he notes, by a temporary suspension of their operation as 'a Water Company' (121). By the end of the 1817–18 season, Sadler's Wells must have seemed in desperate need of rebranding.

Grimaldi's reinstatement in 1818 helped relieve some of Charles the Younger's anxieties—but it also produced others. The terms of Grimaldi's return included his purchase of new shares in the theatre, which its manager clearly resented. 'A Theatre', Charles the Younger remarked, 'should be like an absolute Monarchy—as a limited Monarchy it will dwindle—as a Republic (of Proprietors and Committees) the administration will get into confusion, and confusion is the forerunner of defeat' (*Memoirs*, 122). This distaste for management by

committee as opposed to individual direction taps into what David Taylor has identified as 'the constitutive ideological tensions that lie behind the polarized constructions of manager-as-despot and manager-as-trustee'.[49] Sadler's Wells had been run by a committee since the 1816–17 season, following the deaths of Richard Hughes and William Reeves (in 1815), and Thomas Dibdin's sale of his shares to Hughes' widow. David Arundell observes that during the first committee season profits fell by £570.[50] Internal division among the partners had resulted in a 'complete paralysis' of the Haymarket in 1813.[51] It is significant, therefore, that Charles the Younger should cite 'a dispute between my Partners and myself' (124) as the main reason for his departure from Sadler's Wells at the end of the 1819–20 season; and, moreover, that he should have stated such open preference for an autocratic model of management, notwithstanding its obviously negative associations (which other managers, as Taylor shows, worked so hard to revise, at least publicly).[52]

***Young Arthur***

Charles the Younger began writing *Young Arthur* in the winter of 1818, putatively to 'divert [his] mind' from the theatre's troubles and 'for the purpose of combatting some greatly prevailing polemical and political opinions' (*Memoirs*, 124). His turn to romance is a suggestive one. The genre was in fashion in the 1810s: Byron had used the label 'romaunt' for *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, while Thomas Moore's 'Oriental Romance' of *Lallah Rookh*, as already mentioned, had been adapted by Charles the Younger for the stage in 1817. The success enjoyed by these poems further suggests that commercial considerations were likely to have been just as prevalent in Charles the Younger's decision to describe *Young Arthur* as 'a metrical romance'. *Young Arthur* was published by the Longman, Hurst, and Rees consortium of booksellers and was

relatively expensive at 14s. for an octavo of 322 pages. It promised income that its author desperately needed by 1819 (then in debtor's jail, pleading 'a wee bit bread', as his verse dramatically explains).[53] But in much the same way that Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* exceeds its designation as a 'romaunt', so too does *Young Arthur*'s generic classification prove something of a misnomer.

Charles the Younger's long poem is divided into eleven 'Subjects' (rather than books), each featuring a 'Variation' in the manner of Henry Fielding's prefatory chapters to *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling* (1749). The third Variation, for example, is entitled 'A Short Stop for breathing, with Hints in Hudibrastic'. There are also several shorter inset poems, ballads, songs, and footnotes throughout. This diversity garnered mixed criticism. The *Literary Gazette* suggested that 'Songs, laments, episodes, ballads, hymns &c are introduced so abundantly, as to give the whole the air of a medley, rather than a uniform composition', while the *Literary Chronicle* suggested that such variety was bound to suit 'all palates'.[54] 'Medley' is the keyword here. As David Duff explains, British Romantic texts tend to fall into one of two camps: 'Typically, they overstate, overperform, or protest too much about their generic affiliations, often by fusing genres and multiplying their generic identity . . . Or, alternatively, they subvert, ironize, or conceal their generic provenance, aspiring to transcend their chosen genre or delivering only a partial or marginal performance of it.'[55] 'In theory as well as in critical practice', Robyn Warhol argues, 'genre is not a neat classification system for settling questions about what texts mean or how they work. Instead, the concept of genre opens up vistas on the ways a text can function in literary history, in a reader's hands and mind, or in material developments within the extratextual world.'[56] In *Young Arthur* Charles the Younger takes clear satisfaction in pushing at the limits of his readers' expectations.

The poem represents an ambitious performance in terms of its geographic as much as its generic span. Between them, the poem's male protagonists, Ernest (the eponymous 'Young Arthur') and Allan experience adventures in Peru, Tunis, and the Arabian deserts. But England, significantly, provides the point of return for all of the poem's characters. Frequently apostrophized as a land of liberty and beneficence, the poem repeatedly invites its readers to make parallels between England in the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries. To this end, the Variations are recognizably modern, often addressing the reader directly and making several references to contemporary culture. Their relation to the main narrative is sometimes rendered explicit, as in Subject VII, wherein Allan's description of 'the sultry Simoom's poisonous gale' is glossed by a footnote defining the Simoom as 'a baleful wind that blows perpetually over the desarts [*sic*] of Arabia; to which Europeans generally fall a sacrifice' (*Young Arthur*, 188). This image is then reused in the accompanying Variation ('The Groans of Britain, and a Legend ad libitum'), where the narrator offers a penetrative diagnosis of the moral state of the nation:

> O Albion, bless'd beyond all other climes!
> Stock, politics, cash payments, or the times,
> Thy only plagues—except (hence, wary be)
> That all confounding siren, luxury;
> . . .
> No dread Simooms they healthful shore disease,
> Thy hale Simoom the happy trade wind's breeze,
> Which to thy busy wharfs, o'er billows curl'd,
> Wafts the best blessings of an envying world. (191)

The passage testifies to the acute concern over moral values that characterized the postwar years. 'There is scarcely a page in which some moral truth is not expressed, or some vice held up to detestation, or some folly satirized', affirmed the *Literary Chronicle*.[57] The warning against luxury, for instance, is inflected, not only by the main narrative's description of the Spanish conquest of Peru ('The Stranger's Tale', Subject III) but by repeated attacks on the dandy as 'a new insect of the 19th century . . . a non-descript' (231).

Charles the Younger's other chief satirical target in the poem is religious fanaticism, justifying a curious reference to 'the imposter' Joanna Southcott (*Young Arthur*, 127), and two extended passages on differences between religious creeds that define Variation V and Subject VII. In each instance, the author adds a footnote, in which he insists that his attack is not directed at religious sects but 'the "troublers of religion"' (126) or 'the sanctimonious' (169), as he later calls them. Charles the Younger here conforms to what Eric Hobsbawm has illuminatingly described as a 'marked parallelism between the movements of religious, social and political consciousness'.[58]

At this point it is worth noting that the proprietors of Sadler's Wells took deliberate care to remove prostitutes from the theatre, and to promote middle-class moral values. Islington became 'an area noted for its evangelical churches, schools, hospitals and reformatories'; its urbanization taking off between 1800 and 1821, when new streets such as Exmouth Street, Myddleton Street, Spencer Street, and Ashby Street were built to accommodate the middle classes.[59] This middle-class reformation of Islington was as much behind Charles the Younger's attempts to reinvent Sadler's Wells' postwar repertoire as it was influential to the shaping of *Young Arthur's* moralistic vein.

The points of contact between Charles the Younger's poetic and theatrical enterprises can be seen in the various performance-related allusions that recur throughout *Young Arthur*. These take a range of forms; from the song 'Fancy dipp'd her pen in dew', used as the opening for Subject VII and glossed in a footnote as having been 'sung by Miss Stephens, composed by Mr Whitaker' (*Young Arthur*, 164), to 'Sir Brandon's History' (Subject IX), which is prefaced by a curious roll-call of the contemporary actors who most distinguished themselves in the role of Richard III (Garrick, Kemble, Cooke, Young, and Kean). Such observations obviously detract from the romance narrative, but rarely without purpose. (The latter, in particular, is likely to have been intended as a sly dig at Astley's Amphitheatre, where an equestrian version of *Richard III* had recently been performed.)[60]

It is not entirely surprising, then, that notwithstanding its label as a 'metrical romance', several magazines and journals catalogued *Young Arthur* as a 'drama'.[61] This generic confusion can be regarded as a fruitful extension of the 'medley-like' qualities attributed to *Young Arthur* specifically, and which, in light of Duff's argument, we can also see as representative of Romantic literature more generally. Although his earliest publication had been a volume of poems called *Poetical Attempts: by a Young Man* (1792), Charles the Younger was clearly anxious about the state of modern poetry and the likely reception that would be accorded to *Young Arthur*. In the poem's Preface he takes care to define himself against the greater celebrity of both his father and brother Thomas ('author of several Dramas, and a Metrical History of England' (*Young Arthur*, vi)), while his Introduction satirizes modern poetry as a degenerate form. The 'monitory' function that Gérard Genette associates with the preface is certainly active here, as Charles the Younger advises readers both 'why' and 'how' his romance should be read.[62] What he fails to explain, of course, is that *Young Arthur* is not, as argued above, much of

a romance at all. Consequently, as the poem develops, what passes as the Preface's customary modesty topos becomes an invitation for criticism, rather than a forestalling of it: 'Sir, I hope you're a much better Christian than poet', the narrator later states (299).

The *Literary Chronicle*, which published the most enthusiastic of *Young Arthur*'s reviews, insisted that authorial apologies were unnecessary. The reviewer not only affirms that Charles the Younger already enjoyed 'a pretty firm hold of the public', but goes so far as to suggest that the short Hymn in Subject III ('There is an eye that all surveys') is a composition worthy of Isaac Watts and Joseph Addison.[63] The *Literary Gazette* concurred —to an extent. Charles the Younger's reputation, its reviewer explained, was as 'a writer generally engaged in less laboured compositions; and accustomed to snatch a temporary achievement of the day, rather than to address himself to more grave and elevated efforts'. But 'the practice of writing for a minor theatre is most likely to improve, than deteriorate literary talent', the reviewer added, reminding readers of the Dibdin family's celebrity.[64] On this point the *Monthly Review; or, Literary Journal* disagreed entirely, however. Charles the Younger was but a pale imitation of his father: 'Where is the vigour,—where is the neatness,—where is the good-humoured flow of soul of that lamented parent?'[65] Although the review concludes by asserting that a 'frivolous, vain, and vapid race of modern poets' meant that poetry itself was in a bad state, the *Monthly Review* had little time to spare for Charles the Younger's attempts to show off his talents for different rhyme schemes and forms.

*Young Arthur* was simply not enough of 'a romance' and too much of a mixed performance. Refusing fully to honour his promise of 'a metrical romance', Charles the Younger produced, instead, a 'medley', characterized by similar strategies to those he pursued as an arranger of pantomimes. The pantomime was a form that always aimed at more than one subject:

as Mayer explains, 'its structure enabled fleeting comedy or satire to be directed at many topics without requiring that they be shown in a logical or plausible sequence'.[66] *Young Arthur*'s generic indeterminacy thus gained considerably greater purchase from Charles the Younger's understanding that with pantomimes, especially, it was often preferable to be 'random', rather than 'precise'.[67] This theatrical context permits *Young Arthur* to be read productively as a poetic translation of the 'whole programme' offered by a minor theatre such as Sadler's Wells, where the nightly entertainments ranged from pantomimes to melodramas, with dancing, singing, and gymnastic feats in between.

**The 'Medley' as Metaphor**

Shortly after completing *Young Arthur*, Charles the Younger opened his final season at Sadler's Wells. The year 1819 would prove a difficult one for most of London's minor theatres, including the Sans Pareil, Olympic, and indeed even the Haymarket, London's summer patent theatre. The study of Sadler's Wells' history between 1814 and 1819 allows us to make various inferences as to the reasons for Charles the Younger's unexpected departure, and to put pressure on the too tidy narrative that he provides in his *Memoirs*. Generalized postwar depression and discontent certainly impinged upon the manager's success, but other, more immediately practical considerations were also at stake, as this chapter has outlined. By the late 1810s, Sadler's Wells faced increased competition in the form of rival spectacular entertainments, the difficulties of operating in a period of acute political unrest, and localized friction within its own managerial committee.

Charles the Younger was not, finally, able to weather the storm and, in his own words, found himself 'a Captain out of Commission' (*Memoirs*, 126). Whereas Jane Scott at the Sans

Pareil was able to keep her theatre successful by engaging in a 'daily weaving of variations upon successful patterns',[68] after 1817 this was less of an option for Charles the Younger, whose audiences had tired of the 'novelty' of aquatic exhibitions after more than a decade of such entertainments. But the extended staging of a wartime repertoire at Sadler's Wells, for example, points not only to Charles the Younger's attempts to deliver continuity, but to take advantage of his reputation in order to engage with postwar politics at a time of significant repression.

Although the government's clampdown on radical opinion makes it difficult to recover Charles the Younger's political allegiances with any confidence, the entertainments at Sadler's Wells and *Young Arthur* mutually suggest that he was committed to advancing limited reform. Acutely aware of his own and his audiences' social standing, Charles the Younger responded to and actively encouraged the development of Islington's middle-class communities by investing ever more heavily in a moralistic repertoire, both on stage and off, as exemplified by *Young Arthur*. The metaphor of the 'medley' offers a neat embodiment of this; not least because during the course of the nineteenth century, the musical medley would become increasingly associated with a popular audience, while music for the elite concentrated more exclusively on one genre or perspective. Literary, musical, and dramatic medleys were not, of course, one and the same: but the notion of a blending together that allows for influences to remain distinct provides, perhaps, the most useful model by which to examine the imbrication of theatrical and political economies that characterized Charles the Younger's final years at Sadler's Wells.

[1] Charles Dibdin the Younger, *Memoirs of Charles Dibdin the Younger*, ed. George Speaight (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1956), 41. The *Memoirs* were composed in 1830 but first

published (in this abridged form) in 1956. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

[2] John Russell Stephens, 'Dibdin, Thomas John (1771–1841)', ODNB (accessed 4 April 2015), oxforddnb.com/view/article/7589?docPos=2.

[3] Chapter 3, p. 90.

[4] Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre*, 28.

[5] Stephens, 'Dibdin, Thomas John'.

[6] Charles Dibdin the Younger, *Songs, &c with a description of the Scenery in the New Aqua-drama called 'The Corsair'* (London, 1814), 24.

[7] These figures, as cited by William St Clair, exclude 'collected editions, imports and piracies'. William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 218.

[8] William Knight, *A Major London Minor: The Surrey Theatre 1805–1865* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1997), 24.

[9] Daniel O'Quinn, 'Theatre, Islam, and the Question of Monarchy', in Swindells and Taylor, *Handbook of The Georgian Theatre*, 638–54, 639.

[10] O'Quinn, 'Theatre', 646.

[11] Claire Mabilat, *Orientalism and Representations of Music in the Nineteenth-Century British Popular Arts* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008), 7.

[12] Sybil Rosenfeld, 'A Sadler's Wells Scene Book', *Theatre Notebook* 15/2 (1960–61): 57–62, 59.

[13] Charles Dibdin the Younger, *Songs, &c in the Pantomime called 'Harlequin Brilliant; or, The Clown's Capers'* (London, 1815), 8–9.

[14] David Mayer, *Harlequin in His Element: The English Pantomime, 1806–1836* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 35.

[15] See 'Sadler's Wells Scene Book', The Garrick Club, London. The book was bought at the sale of Louis Haghes' Library and Engravings on 7 August 1885 (Lot 48).

[16] Shearer West, 'Manufacturing Spectacle', in Swindells and Taylor, *Handbook of The Georgian Theatre*, 286–303, 288.

[17] Charles Dibdin the Younger, *Songs, and other Vocal Compositions in the Pantomime called 'Mermaid; or, Harlequin Pearl Diver!'* (London, 1815), 'Scenery'.

[18] Stuart Semmel, 'Reading the Tangible Past: British Tourism, Collecting, and Memory after Waterloo', *Representations* 69 (2000): 9–37, 9.

[19] Richard Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1978), 239–40.

[20] Mayer, *Harlequin*, 3.

[21] James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin, 'Introduction', in James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin (eds), *The Romantic Metropolis, The Urban Scene of British Culture, 1780–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1–41, 8.

[22] Moyra Haslett, *Byron's 'Don Juan' and the Don Juan Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 142.

[23] Knight, *A Major London Minor*, 24.

[24] Olympic Theatre Playbill (26 January 1818).

[25] Royal Circus Playbill (14 May 1817).

[26] Royal Circus Playbill (9 September 1816).

[27] Chandler and Gilmartin, 'Introduction', 1.

[28] N.M. Bligh, 'Mirror Curtains', *Theatre Notebook* 15/2 (1960–61): 56. Although Bligh dates the curtain to 1822, it was already on display (albeit not fully complete) by December 1821. On theatrical autoethnography see Daniel O'Quinn, *Staging Governance: Theatrical Imperialism in London 1770–1800* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 11 and *Entertaining Crisis in the Atlantic Imperium 1770–1790* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

[29] *The Drama; Or, Theatrical Pocket Magazine*, Vol. II, no. III (January, 1822), 154; and *The Times*, 27 December 1821; pg.2; Issue 11439.

[30] Moody, 148; 154.

[31] *The Times*, 27 December 1821.

[32] 'London Letters to Country Cousins. – No. 1', from *The Court Magazine and Belle Assemblée*. July 1835, in *The Court Magazine; Containing original Papers by Distinguished Writers and Finely Engraved Portraits, Landscapes, and Costumes from Painting by Eminent Masters.* London: Edward Churton, 1836), Vol. VII (From July to December, 1835), 4.

[33] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1963; 1970), 662.

[34] Ibid., 669.

[35] Jacky Bratton, 'Jane Scott the writer-manager', in Tracy C. Davis and Ellen Donkin (eds), *Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 77–98, 89.

[36] Mayer, *Harlequin*, 52.

[37] For a good description of the basic structure of pantomimes, see ibid., 23–31.

[38] *Theatrical Inquisitor* (January 1818): 51, as quoted in Steven E. Jones, *Satire and Romanticism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 176.

[39] Leigh Hunt, *Theatrical Examiner* (26 January 1817).

[40] Ibid.

[41] See Chapter 5, p. 125 esp.

[42] Thompson, *English Working Class*, 696.

[43] *British Stage and Literary Cabinet* (August 1817): 183.

[44] Mark Philp, *Reforming Ideas in Britain: Politics and Language in the Shadow of the French Revolution, 1789–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 256.

[45] *British Stage and Literary Cabinet* (April 1817), 83.

[46] In 1815 William Hazlitt responded to false rumors of Grimaldi's death by comparing this possibility to Napoleon's second exile: 'As without the gentleman at St. Helena, there is an end of politics in Europe; so, without the clown at Sadler's Wells, there must be an end of pantomimes in this country!' *Theatrical Examiner* (31 December 1815). This was an audacious if humorous claim which, as James Mulvihill underlines, acknowledges 'the extent to which theatre and public life were co-opting each other'. James Mulvihill, 'William Hazlitt on Dramatic Text and Performance', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 41/4 (2001: 'The Nineteenth Century'), 695–709, 707.

[47] Highfill Jr, Burnim, and Langhans, *Biographical Dictionary of Actors*, 2:237–39.

[48] The letter is quoted in David Arundell, *The Story of Sadler's Wells 1683–1964* (London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1965), 92–93.

[49] David Taylor, 'Theatre Managers and the Managing of Theatre History', in Swindells and Taylor, *Handbook of the Georgian Theatre*, 70–88, 70.

[50] Arundell, *Sadler's Wells*, 91.

[51] William Burling, *Summer Theatre in London 1661–1820, and the Rise of the Haymarket Theatre* (London: Associated University Presses, 2000), 195.

[52] Taylor, 'Theatre Managers', 86–88.

[53] Charles Dibdin the Younger, *Young Arthur; or, The Child of Mystery: A Metrical Romance* (London, 1819), 95. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

[54] *Literary Gazette* (July 1819): 484; *Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* (August 1819): 212.

[55] David Duff, *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 19.

[56] Robyn Warhol, 'Introduction: Genre Regenerated', in Robyn Warhol-Down (ed.), *The Work of Genre: Selected Essays from the English Institute* (Cambridge, MA: English Institute in collaboration with the American Council of Learned Societies, 2011), unpaginated (pa. 20).

[57] *Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* (August 1819): 212

[58] As quoted in Thompson, *English Working Class*, 427.

[59] Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing, 1840–1880* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 109.

[60] Unmarked clipping, Victoria & Albert Theatre Collection, 'Astley's Amphitheatre' box.

[61] The 'New Publications' issued by the *Quarterly Review* (April 1819:559) thus labelled the poem a 'drama.' The *Edinburgh Annual Register*, on the other hand, listed *Young Arthur* under 'Novels, Tales and Romances' (January 1819: 510).

[62] Gérard Genette, *Paratexts*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 197.

[63] *Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* (August 1819): 211.

[64] *Literary Gazette* (July 1819): 484.

[65] *Monthly Review; or, Literary Journal* (February 1820): 211.

[66] Mayer, *Harlequin*, 6.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Bratton, 'Jane Scott', 95.