Aberystwyth University

National Myth and Imperial Fantasy
Marshall, Louise

Publication date:
2008

Citation for published version (APA):
Marshall, L. (2008). *National Myth and Imperial Fantasy: Representations of Britishness on the Early Eighteenth-Century Stage*. (1st ed.) Springer Nature. http://hdl.handle.net/2160/12714

Contents

Introduction: Dramatising Britain – Nation, Fantasy and the London Stage, 1719–1745

'Our Poet brings a Master-Glass to shew,
What your Sires were, and what your selves are now'
James Moore Smythe,

The Rival Modes (1727)

The centrality of literature to politics during the eighteenth century has been identified by modern scholarship as one of the defining characteristics of British culture from this period. 'Serious writers', Bertrand Goldgar argues, 'could not escape making political choices, for politics touched and coloured virtually every aspect of life in the world of letters, even the reception of plays or poems not overtly political.' This book seeks to consider the unique contribution made by drama to a range of early eighteenth-century political discourses. Drama is often credited with a characteristic topicality, responsive to its cultural and historical place, mirroring the attitudes and ideas of its era. As the prologue to James Moore Smythe's *The Rival Modes* attests, the theatre can be seen as the nation's mirror, a microcosmic version of the state.

Britain was dramatised on the early eighteenth-century London stage as a paragon state. There was seemingly little space for anything but a fanatical and fantastical representation of the nation. As the numerous prologues and epilogues dedicated to 'BRITONS' declared, the nation's glorious past must be reflected in its present. But despite the seeming robustness of such patriotic declarations multiple layers of ambiguity lie beneath these lines of nationalistic bravado. Within the confines of the theatre, itself linguistically reverberating rhetoric from the political world, modern Britain was repeatedly positioned as an echo of its own prestigious history. That is, the prologues suggest a continuation of hereditary uniqueness. They assert Britain's distinction from and superiority to her European neighbours, celebrate her unique maritime position and the tenacious independence of her people. But, in the act of gazing into a mirror does the audience see on stage a true reflection of themselves or a distorted echo, obscuring or emphasising their own flaws? The 'Master-Glass' shows the audience their past and their present in one image. But this image is no tableau; it lacks fixity and is a transient, malleable representation. Just as the prologues and epilogues presume the homogeneity of audiences by labelling them 'Britons' and assume the universality of such a term, the plays and the stories they re-tell demonstrate the endless variety of possible interpretations casting doubt over the reality and stability of such a superlative vision of the nation. In their attempts to elevate the status of audiences and evidence the greatness of the nation prologues speculate over notions of ancestral moral connectivity between modern Britons and their ancient forebears. It is in this gap between the constructed fantasy of Britain and the realities of history, politics and culture that the early eighteenth-century plays demonstrate their interaction with politics and their interventions in political debate.

Despite this notion of an insidious nationalistic gloss the plays discussed in this book also reveal the theatre's role in offering opinion and criticism as well as approbation of the current age. Folly and vice are reflected as a cathartic entertainment, prompting the voyeuristic audience to self-congratulation coupled with anxiety. On stage the players represent the fears, fantasies and desires of the implied audience. In their roles the men and women on stage become representative of their fellow Britons. The theatre audience itself becomes a miniaturised society, an imagined community whose responses to the performance emphasise the fickle nature of public approbation, both in terms of theatrical entertainment and politics. But the theatre offered more than just the fantasies generated by the need for theatrical spectacle. The ocular fantasies that formed the staple material of pantomime, opera and entr'acte entertainments reflected the public spectacle, the national fantasy that was Britain and Britons. By representing audiences to themselves, the London stage is inextricably immersed in notions that permeated political, social, moral, religious and cultural debates of the period, the nature of Britain, Britons and Britishness. Of course this is not to suggest that the audience would 'recognize itself as a unified nation' or that 'given groups responded in simple and direct ways to dramatic representations of themselves'. Beyond the simple act of looking there is no imperative to assume any further cohesive act within the transient community of the theatre audience. However, the language of the prologues and epilogues assumes not only a sense of communal experience in the act of watching the play but also a shared response to the action on stage, be it political factionalism, favouritism, usurpation or victory. 'Britons', so the texts assert will experience a unified response. Similarly the fear prompted by spectatorship theory regarding the public nature of drama assumed that 'sight creates a bond between spectator and event, which of necessity implicates the observer'. If eighteenth-century anti-theatrical commentators feared that by attending plays, the audience could be wooed to the behaviours demonstrated on stage; there are clear implications for the use of drama as a vehicle for political propaganda.

It is important to remember alongside this sense of the theatre's political interventions that the activity of the London theatres was, by its very nature, commercial. Theatrical activity was driven by the needs of managers, performers and writers to make money, to capitalise on the desire of audiences to be entertained, placed on public view and to engage in social, political and communitarian activities. Just as the main piece was only one part of the evening's entertainment, the act of watching the play was only one facet of audiences' agendas. So the theatre during the early eighteenth century became a place of intertextual productivity, a location devoted to communication but subject to continual change, development and experimentation. Ideas were exchanged between an eclectic community of players and audience, managers, playwrights and critics whose response to opportunity and desire to secure commercial, aesthetic and political success was not necessarily simultaneously communicable in one theatrical product. This complex sense of continuous dialogue, the theatre's engagement with public discourse, is what this book aims to bring to life, positioning the London Stage as the respondent to, commentator on, advocate and marshal of public debates, capitulator with and demystifier of national fantasies.

The plays discussed in this book were published and performed during the period 1719–1745. They are history plays, a genre selected because of its relative abundance in the catalogue of 'new' plays during the period but also because of their engagement with recurrent contemporary political anxieties relating to nationhood and Britishness. The degree of textual engagement with politics is of course variable and differs from play to play. Interestingly however, the specific nature of British identity frequently forms the subject of prologues and epilogues irrespective of the content of the play itself. Similarly, the key terms commonly used in the rhetorical attacks that define eighteenth-century political discourse, favouritism, factionalism and patriotism are liberally scattered throughout the plays discussed, again, irrespective of any overt political content in the text itself. As a body of texts however, the wealth of political themes addressed by the plays suggests not only topicality but also an active participation in political discourse. Drama was particularly suited to the purposes of disseminating political propaganda, influencing as well as responding to political polemic. I do not wish to suggest that party policy was dictated by the London stage, but rather that the texts I discuss participated in a dialogue of political ideas of which the history plays are one distinctive strand. So, despite the contrary claim arising from its economic imperative, the eighteenth-century theatre is less a barometer of public feeling, but rather a multi-faceted arena in which the instigating and sustaining of political debate was one function. The extent to which this was a two-way process, a vehicle for dialogue between public and government is an intriguing possibility. The transposition of David Armitage's account of opposition writing to Government texts, viewed alongside Government defensive reactions responding to plays such as Gays, *The Beggar's Opera* makes all the more plausible the possibility that not only does the theatre reflect political events but that the theatres and their audiences influence politics.

This reflexive dialogue between dramatic text(s) and political commentator(s) existed in part because of the ways in which plays were commissioned and written. Politicians, political commentators and, on rare occasions, the royal family all commissioned plays from known supporters. But as Brean Hammond observes, playwrights were in fact rarely commissioned to write plays. Indeed texts were written uncommanded, some by party followers with a specific political purpose, whilst those aspiring to patronage penned texts aimed specifically to aid their political and or financial advancement. Playwrights sought patronage by writing what they imagined their prospective patron wanted to hear and the image they would value projected on stage. Indeed, authors clearly felt no obligation to necessarily promote their own political beliefs. Many wrote primarily from a financial perspective, choosing whichever political agenda was most likely to sell theatre tickets. However, it is not simply authorial motivation that dictates the position of the dramatic text in contemporary politics. The economic significance of the demand for cheap reprints that were readily available from the 1730s demonstrates the combined need for plays to be effective on stage but also to appeal to readers. The plays were subject to public consumption on multiple levels all of which involved degrees of interpretation. All of the plays discussed in this book appropriate history and it is this manipulation of largely well-known historical events rather than an individual author's political affiliations that denotes the politicisation of these texts both in their performative and documentary guises. So my focus is not the biographical accounts of playwrights or the political affiliations of theatre managers or even the imagined audiences of the various London playhouses but the discourses with which the plays themselves interact and engage. The ways in which these plays reflect, respond to, re-enact and turn against the fantasies that underpinned notions of the nation's identity and the imagined attributes of Britishness, fantasies which shored-up, linguistically if not tangibly, the stability of the nation. Despite Jacobite incursions, threats from Europe and beyond to Britain's colonial trade and endeavour, threats to commerce and the liberty of individuals from the Barbary nations, internal factionalism, political instability and the financial insecurities of a growing merchant economy the nation was strengthened and secured by a tenuous fantasy of steadfast and historically justified stability. In short, although

the theatre may not have directly contributed to or significantly influenced political policy it was part of the process by which Britain's sense of stability, superiority and authority was imposed.

Historicising identities and staging the nation's histories

During the seventeenth century and into the first half of the eighteenth century history was perceived as a form of literature aimed at the gratification as well as the education of the reader. History did not exclude fictionality and the intersection between historical and fictional narratives was even more explicit on stage. The dramatisation of history was primarily an entertainment, albeit entertainment with an implicit suggestion of a didactic function. But history was not only reworked for the aesthetics of the public stage it was also plundered for its partisan political value. During the Walpole period history became an increasingly important staple of partisan discourse and as a result the people's interest in their nation's past was stirred. Gerrard cites Bolingbroke's *Remarks on the History of England* (1730) as an example of 'the brand of history familiar to most readers: an interpretation of the recent and the remote past based on a sense of continuity and pride in what it meant to be a Briton'. Histories were produced which positioned modern Britain as the 'necessary and healthy descendant' of the nation's own past but which simultaneously valued and celebrated that past positioning it as an exemplary heritage.

During the early eighteenth century therefore, the term 'history play' could be used to refer to any text that chose an historical theme and did not apply exclusively to the dramatisation of 'events generally accepted as having actually occurred'. One example of this is George Jeffrey's *Edwin* (1724) in which fact, fiction and fantasy are intimately entwined. The appropriation of history, be it British, English or foreign, allows for the re-interpretation of events to suit a specific political agenda. As D.R. Woolf suggests, 'historical interest was political interest, as usual, the past held messages for the present'. Many of the plays discussed in this book present distorted or even invented histories not only in alluding to topical themes but also to market specific political propaganda. The texts are a result of the intricate relationship between history and politics during the early eighteenth century which positioned historian and reader as co-creators, an interpretive 'community engaged in a rhetorical arbitration of their own history'. History was, therefore, a mode of interpretation, 'a form of spectacle designed to awaken the imagination and stimulate the sensibility'. The interplay between history, theatrical performance and fantasies of nationhood becomes entwined in the concept of spectacle. Interpretation and imagination are needed to decipher and sustain these inter-related spectacles. Both author and audience were active participants in the interpretation of history plays and one important element of this interpretation was the reflection that history cast upon contemporary politics. So those eighteenth-century poets, playwrights and political commentators who wrote about Britain's past can be described as wielding 'history as a yardstick to measure the shortcomings of the present'. But not only did history prove useful as a tool for emphasising the shortfall of modernity it also stood to highlight points of contact between the illustrious past and the present. History reflected the positive as well as the negative.

So, eighteenth-century history plays were particularly caught up in politics as participants in and evidence of contemporary political discourse. As Hammond suggests, 'the historian and satirist [were] joint custodians of the nation's moral and political health'. What is interesting here is the suggested link between history and entertainment. By attending performances of dramatic reconstructions of history, by being entertained and morally and historically educated, the audience were actively participating in the interpretation of the relationship between history and politics, forming interpretive communities encoding the nation's identity through its history. During the early eighteenth century narrative histories were usually explicitly didactic, styled as lessons in statecraft, public conduct or the origins of the constitution. In the very act of rewriting these histories therefore, playwrights were confronting political bias. Their texts offered audiences an interpretation of history from which they should 'learn' political lessons. Such bias can be identified merely by the historical subject, for example the anti-Walpole propaganda disseminated by the anonymous *The Fall of Mortimer* (1731). More often however history is malleable and its relevance to contemporary issues can be constructed by author and audience. The resultant variations in the accounts of the same history, re-appropriated and manipulated for diverse political purposes is a recurrent theme of this book.

As a literary form the narrative history became increasingly popular during the eighteenth century. Texts by diverse historians such as Knolles, Rapin, Hill and Hume were regularly reprinted to meet the demands of a growing readership. The popularity of these often conflicting versions of British and foreign histories has implications for modern narratives of emergent cultural nationalism. Clearly such differing versions of English history, not necessarily written by Englishmen, or even Englishwomen, go some way towards challenging arguments for a unifying and homogenous national identity. This narrative can also be refuted by the plays discussed in this book. As historical accounts these texts engage, to varying degrees, in establishing a national

identity. For many of these texts, British identity is characterised by patriotism which, in the political rhetoric of the period, is utilised cross-party to evidence the lack of patriotic conduct in partisan opponents. The popular narrative histories of the period were of course in themselves subject to political bias and often accepted or rejected by the public on this basis. To return to Bertrand Goldgar's argument, considered at the beginning of this introduction, these plays are 'touched' by politics, but it is not their status as works of literature or the seriousness of their authors that dictates this relationship. It is through the dramatisation of history that these texts engage with politics. In dramatising the past early eighteenth-century history plays are touched by political discourses concerning Britishness and nationhood but, is the contact reciprocal? Are these political discourses 'touched' by the plays that dramatise them?

In many of the plays discussed, notions of identity, Britishness and nationalism are determined in direct relation to party agendas. So whilst Tory models of British identity rested on ancient democracy and agrarianism, this nostalgic version of national identity was directly opposed to the Whig model of modernity which stated liberty as modern and the result of a progressive constitution not an ancient right. These versions of national identity are clearly influenced by party politics. Such diverse accounts of a constituent element of British identity suggest that versions of Britishness are, in part at least, derived from party interpretations of the foundation of British liberty. Was liberty achieved by the Glorious Revolution in 1688 and the subsequent Act of Settlement or conversely destroyed by the forced abdication of James II? Alternatively was liberty resuscitated in the recent past by the accession of William and Mary? I do not wish to deny the existence of an over-arching image of the idealised Briton. On the contrary, as Hugh Cunningham observes, eighteenth century nationalists were convinced that, 'the English were an elect nation, that "God is English"'. Indeed, the historical figures at the centre of these plays are often those English monarchs described by Christine Gerrard as 'staple icons of British national identity' – Alfred, Edward III, Henry V, and Elizabeth I. However, this short list does not encompass the broad scope of iconographic representations of Britishness demonstrated in the history plays discussed in this book. Playwrights and political commentators derived examples of 'British' patriotism from Saxon, Celtic, Roman and even Islamic histories and the neat delineation between Whig and Tory interpretations of the nation's identity and the origins of British liberty are not consistently adhered to in the history plays. Given that, 'dynastic self-justification was not significantly less intense after 1714 than it had been in either the sixteenth or the seventeenth century' this broad spectrum of historical examples suggests that post-1714 commentators were searching for ways to define and, in some instances, validate the new dynasty. The Hanoverian dynasty, the German foundations of which, were clearly at odds with the conventional 'staple icons' of British identity.

Such expressions of British superiority are underwritten by an assumptive homogeneity that disregarded the realities of cultural difference in favour of a unified cultural self-aggrandizement. This raises a number of problems for the analysis of representations of national identity not least of which is the cultural divide between monarch and people. On a more 'domestic' front, is any distinction made between the nuances of British and English identity? Certainly many of the plays fail to differentiate between these two signifiers. How do the Scottish, Welsh and Anglo-Irish national identities impinge on the emergent 'British' model? The political implications of national diversity are overlooked in the plays, not simply as the result of a London-centric political and cultural agenda but out of the desire to appropriate the fantasy of Britishness which all of the plays, in various ways perpetuate and enlarge. Regional variation, political antagonisms and linguistic diversity all stand opposed to the notion of national unity and homogenous identity. So, Linda Colley's notion of a cohesive British identity is simultaneously upheld and destabilised by the plays. Difference and diversity are effaced, not as a result of an actualised homogeneity but a fiction supporting an identity constructed on the superiority of unity over difference.

The rhetoric of patriotism formed a further barrier to the expression of cultural and regional difference within the nation. Patriotism was a key term in the description of British identity and a recurrent concern of historical drama. Emerging as a political term in the 1720s patriotism connoted 'devotion to the common good of the *patria* and hostility to sectional interests'. A sense of the nation and national pride, cultural homogeneity, and fierce resistance to political factionalism were the essential markers of patriotic conduct, leaving limited space for the ethnic diversity of a conglomerate state. Such levelling of cultural diversity was not confined to opposition polemic as the association with patriotism might infer. The decidedly Tory renderings of patriotism thought of as conventional in scholarly accounts of early eighteenth-century politics are not upheld by the plays discussed in this book. Patriotism and liberty were key themes in *all* of the history plays irrespective of the political agendas of individual texts. The Bolingbrokean brand of patriotism, despite its endurance, was not definitive, and the securing of the 'political liberties of the English nation' dominated the stage irrespective of the partisan agendas of playwright, audience, text, patron or theatre. Patriotism fuelled the fantasy of Britishness

by imposing a common code of conduct for Britons, moving the term beyond the level of nomenclature by ascribing to it a sense of historically validated identity.

Instability and fantasy: the politics of theatre

Underpinning the fantasy of Britishness is another persistent trope of the early eighteenth century history plays, the pursuit of political stability. Scholars broadly agree that Walpole's ministry oversaw a period of political consolidation. But we should not render this period as a time of political stagnation devoid of party interaction. The very existence of a loud radical alternative to government provoked an equally vociferous conservative accord with the criticised administration. Of course Tory attacks were not the only site of criticism targeting government policy. The close affiliation between the Whigs and Hanoverians was crucially effective in stabilising the relationship between the administration and monarchy, but unity within the party was far from assured. The image of stability cultivated by Walpole and so important to the self-aggrandizing rhetoric of the nationalist commentators was reliant on the industry of placemen to the extent that, 'If any of the various attempts to exclude placemen from Parliament by legislation had succeeded, the result would have been administrative anarchy.' This image of a government close to crisis point as a result of internal instability contradicts assertions regarding Walpole's ministry as a source of political consolidation. One of the ways in which the period 'defended its own myths of stability against super evident threat' was through drama and the spectacle of Britishness.

The strong opposition to Walpole had various consequences for dramatic production, the most obvious of which was the wealth of anti-Walpole drama produced during the minister's supremacy of which the infamous *Beggar's Opera* (1728) is but one example. Such a growth in direct and personal attacks on Walpole resulted, many scholars have argued, in the Stage Licensing Act of 1737. Goldgar contends that the Walpole administration reacted determinedly to the threat posed by opposition literature: 'the alienation of literary figures from the world of public action was well under way in the 1730s and, above all, that such alienation was encouraged and hastened by the character of the Walpole regime'. However, the effect Walpole and his ministry had on the drama of this period was not entirely one of circumscription. Just as some playwrights were keen to demonstrate publicly their opposition to Walpole, others were eager to show their support. Pro-Walpole drama, written either as the direct result of patronage or created in search of favour, was frequently produced on the London stage. Much scholarly work has been carried out to uncover the extent of this literary opposition and to examine the threat this body of work posed to Walpole's power and reputation. But this partisan delineation of texts and authors does not suit my own agenda because it purposefully obscures the discursive nature of the London theatres. Despite his claims for the lack of pro-Walpole literature, and the congruent sense that opposition literature received no rebuff, because it was considered politically powerless against the monolithic stability of the Walpole administration at its height of power, Goldgar makes the pertinent suggestion that 'the notion of all the wit on one side was much more politically significant and had much more political utility than any of the works of wit themselves'. But unlike Goldgar I do not see 'wit' as a singularly Tory or opposition quality and certainly claims for 'wit' were made on all sides. What is important here is the notion that political instability is reflected in literary diversity and in particular dramatic diversity.

Those in opposition to Walpole repeatedly cited favouritism and the employment of parliamentary placemen as his failings. This, coupled with his resistance to war with England's traditional Catholic European enemies, provided a powerful rhetorical base for opposition to the minister. Modern scholars often identify the favourite as the antonym to the idealised patriot. The favourite is frequently portrayed in the plays discussed in this book, but, particularly given the cross-party appropriation of patriot rhetoric, it should not be assumed that the favourite is necessarily represented as an enemy to the nation. Walpole's position as a favourite of the Hanoverians created a problem for the stability and credibility of British politics requiring deft rhetorical positioning to sidestep the myriad negative associations conjured by the dual image of favourite and monarch. This endeavour to re-appropriate favouritism can be seen in a range of pro-Walpole texts with a variety of degrees of rhetorical flourish. Similarly, the effect of the preferment system is a prominent dramatic theme. This 'lynchpin' of ministerial and political power is represented in the plays in various guises. Preferment is identified as detrimental to the political system in some texts yet essential to its success in others. Party factionalism and in-party opposition are seen either to destabilise parliament, leaving the government open to corruption, or are positioned as demonstrative of an appropriate and necessary challenge to government supremacy.

One of the most interesting and dynamic causes of political factionalism during the Walpole era were not the domestic issues surrounding preferment and placemen but reactions to and commentary on Britain's role as a developing colonial power. Again the history plays represent and respond to the diversity of contemporary

opinion. Some writers question the validity of colonialism, others consider how far the emergent British Empire reflects an improvement both on contemporary and historic empires. Such concerns echo an earlier discomfort with the policies of the Tory regime that precipitated imperial expansion, seeking to secure parliamentary stability through politically 'unnatural' alliances. Caution with regard to colonialism can therefore be represented as primarily an opposition concern transferable to whichever party was not in 'control' of this simultaneous external expansion and internal stabilisation. Such an analysis is somewhat complicated by the strong opposition to Walpole's tactical inactivity with regard to the various military threats posed to British colonial interests during his time in office. However, it should not be assumed that opposition to Britain's colonialism was restricted to opposition plays, indeed reticence concerning the nation's colonial endeavour was often impervious to political allegiance.

So, the spectres of favouritism, factionalism, placement and treaties plagued not only the Walpole administration but also dominated the theatre in its production of plays which represented the factions and favourites of Britain's past as exemplars or omens for the present. Of course the theatre itself was subject to its own administrative factions and favourites and the faction and intrigue associated with eighteenth century theatres has prompted many scholars to view the period as an age of 'actors rather than playwrights'. Certainly there is evidence of a cult of stardom amidst accounts of contemporary performances. When Gay's *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of Three Hours After Marriage* (1717) was performed at Drury Lane the audience famously sat in awe as Wilks delivered the prologue only to erupt in vitriol at the start of the play which 'acted like a ship tost in a tempest . . . through clouds of confusion and uproar' until Oldfield rose to speak the epilogue at which, 'the storm subsided'. So individual 'stars' commanded the audience but contest and faction existed between playwrights, managers, actors, actresses and theatres alike, fuelling not only the rising 'cult of stardom' but also the sense that the public theatres and their communities were a microcosm of the wrangling evident in public politics. Factionalism and favouritism in the theatre was, if contemporary periodical accounts are a reliable gauge, more salacious and more heterogeneously entertaining and the resultant instability more readily ascribed with creative dynamism than the parallel effects upon the theatre's 'serious' counterpart.

Prohibiting the nation's commentator

Critics have argued that the Stage Licensing Act of 1737 virtually put an end to the performance of politically motivated material on the London stage a contention which clearly runs counter to the perspectives of this book. Certainly some plays were refused license, whilst others were forced to withdraw from public performance, but the true impact of the Act on the curtailment of politically motivated dramatic activity is far from clear. Henry Brooke's *Gustavus Vasa* (1739) was the first play to be banned under the directives of the new Act. Brooke claimed in his defence that he meant only to write a history play, the political analogy for which his play was condemned was, according to Brooke, unintentional. It is clear here that the act of writing history can become a foil for obscuring political comment, history is the commentator's defense. Other plays prohibited in the first years of the new Act such as, James Thomson's *Edward and Eleonora* (1739), William Paterson's *Arminius* (1740), and John Kelly's *The Levee* (1741) could not so easily adopt Brooke's defense. Perhaps the most famous example of a play prohibited from performance was John Gay's *Polly*. Intended as a sequel to *The Beggar's Opera*, *Polly* was banned from production in 1729, eight years before the Licensing Act took effect. John Loftis has linked the prohibition of *Polly* to what he describes as a widespread clampdown by the Walpole administration on opposition literature as a way of securing opportunity for its own literary supporters.

I wish to challenge recent claims by a number of critics for the cessation of political commentary through drama as a result of the Stage Licensing Act. The reduction in numbers of explicitly political plays was not caused directly by the restriction on dramatic content, rather, the result of the monopoly created by the Act. The reduction in the number of licensed theatres necessitated a parallel reduction in the number of new plays produced each year. The Covent Garden and Drury Lane monopoly had a serious effect on dramatic activity post-1737. The plays discussed in this book are taken from across the divide critics have conventionally perceived between dramatic participation in politics pre-1737 and Walpole's attempts to exclude drama from the political arena. It is therefore important to stress that the production of a smaller number of new plays post-1737 is merely an indication of the necessary curtailment of theatrical productivity rather than a sudden void of political commentary in dramatic texts. In effect what the Act achieved, although not necessarily what it intended to do, was the curtailment of the theatre's dialogue with politics. The drama of the period was not de-politicised but the potential for extended political discourse was dramatically reduced.

Of course, closet drama filled some of the spaces left on the public stage by more risqué or explicitly political plays, which, even before the Stage Licensing Act may not have been either permitted public performance by the Lord Chamberlain or selected for production by theatre managers. Closet drama by its very

nature could be more defamatory and explicit in its approach to political comment, particularly given the assumptions that writers could make about the shared agenda of their self-selecting readership/audience. Clearly some of the discourse between drama and politics continued in these private settings but, for the most part, closet drama is not encapsulated in the scope of this book. My interest lies in those plays selected for performance on the open stage. The public nature of these texts has significance for their contribution to political discourse and to the appropriation of these histories for propagandistic purposes. As public texts subject to public scrutiny and varied interpretation these plays become active participants in the ideological debates of the period. As public spectacles, reliant on the financial support of the paying audiences and private favour, these texts engage with and echo 'current trend[s] if not contemporary attitudes'. Public and populist fantasies are represented on stage and it is the public nature of these texts which makes them 'conspicuously sensitive to political currents' and demonstrates the theatre's intervention in politics.

The five chapters of this book are organised thematically in order to read texts that engage with specific topical issues in juxtaposition. This is not to suggest that points of contact do not exist outside of this rather artificial division, or that plays addressing seemingly contrasting subjects are not engaged in a dialogue concerning a shared political discourse. This structure is rather a guide to potential rhetorical pathways, merely intended to facilitate the reader's navigation not impose an authoritative route. Thus, in 'Ancient Britons and Liberty' a group of plays that retell ancient British history are considered in relation to notions of national identity that locate the origins of contemporary Britishness in the nation's ancient ancestors. This chapter explores texts that respond to and re-appropriate established national myths regarding liberty, heroism, manliness and customs. Plays that insist on the longevity and endurance of liberty as demonstrated by Britain's ancient heroes, re-enforcing a well-worn version of Britishness and a dominant national myth that underpinned notions of British identity during the early eighteenth century. It is this myth of a heritage of carefully defended personal and national liberty that underpins the notions of national and imperial identity exploited by texts discussed in the chapters that follow.

The cluster of plays discussed in 'Kings, Ministers and Favourites' focus on favouritism, a theme that dominated British political commentary during the 1730s. Here histories that relate the threats posed to Protestant versions of the national myth of liberty by the corrupt monarchs and ministers of Britain's past are placed in context with contemporary concerns for the stability of government. Favouritism and factionalism are frequently juxtaposed in these plays, identified as interconnected threats to national liberty, itself intrinsic to nationalist notions of British superiority. In contrast to the plays discussed in chapter one, these texts are not universally triumphant in their declarations of British superiority. By focusing on ill-fated episodes from Britain's history the plays disclose the myth of national liberty and undermine the presumed supremacy of Britons over their continental neighbours. In demonstrating the fragility of a national self-image founded on such myths these plays reveal the transitory nature of the nation's moral, political and military superiority.

Adaptations of Shakespeare's English history plays are discussed in 'Shakespeare, the National Scaffold'. This chapter explores the appropriation of Shakespeare for nationalist purposes and women's role as idealised Britons within the specific context of the theatre. The adaptations document a multiplicity of political concerns, including but not limited to the threat posed by Jacobitism to the stability of the nation. The plays stress the security of British liberty despite threats from foreign powers and they construct a cross-gender model for British political virtue, the patriot character of 'true' Britons. The role of Shakespeare is important here in terms of theatre history as well as literary and social contexts. As the century progressed, Shakespeare came to represent 'English Liberty' and the works of Shakespeare were therefore relevant to modern Britons not only because playwrights adapted these texts to comment on current political crises, but also due to a developing image of Shakespeare as a national icon, a literary and political exemplar. These texts are engaged in a search for a unifying notion of British identity which gains both literary and political credence from the image of nationalism evoked by Shakespeare.

The fourth group of plays, drawn together in 'Britain, Empire and Julius Caesar', moves the discussion from issues of national myth-making to imperial fantasy and colonial ambition. This chapter discusses plays which draw parallels between contemporary Britain and ancient Rome, promoting Britain as a superior, more enlightened, emergent global power. The focus however is not to establish these plays as domestic allegory but as models for British colonial endeavour. The texts discussed in this chapter are at odds with the scholarly consensus that during the early eighteenth century, Caesar was characterised by tyranny and despotic power. These plays represent Caesar as a patriot colonialist, a model Roman and a model for modern British colonial endeavour. In creating an alternative version of Caesar, a myth reflecting Britain's own notions of liberty and superiority, these texts feed contemporary fantasies regarding the egalitarian nature of British colonial endeavour and the legitimacy of British imperialism.

The final chapter, 'Turks, Christians and Imperial Fantasy', examines texts that engage with the instability of notions of British superiority and the insecurity of empire-building based upon imperial fantasies. This chapter focuses on three plays that exploit Islamic history, drawing allegorical connections between colonial Britain and the Ottoman Empire. By representing in microcosm the downfall of the Ottoman Empire, these plays participate in the debate regarding Britain's national and increasingly imperial identity. In these plays, concerns for the costs and benefits of maintaining empire lead to questions about religious intolerance and, in unresolved contradiction. Just as favouritism and factionalism were seen to destabilise the mythologies surrounding contemporary notions of Britishness, the imperial fantasy envisioned in the Roman plays is threatened by the realities of empire represented in Ottoman history. The assumed authority legitimated by a constructed British governmental, religious and cultural superiority is undermined by the suggestion of parity of objective between Christian and Turk. These texts transpose the discussion from the notions of imperial fantasy explored in the Roman plays towards a more cautious discourse regarding the realities of empire and the threat posed by insatiable expansion, to Britain, Britishness and the liberty of Britons.

Issues of patriotism, national identity and idealism therefore connect the plays beyond their thematic focus and support the broad contention that the texts discussed are contributors to a coherent body of cross-party debate. The London theatres participated in the bolstering of a national self-image embedded in a sense of divinely ordained superiority that was not exclusive to Protestant Whig literary production. This book positions the plays and the theatres in which they were performed as part of a literary-political milieu and examines the broader cultural debates that they speak to.

Arguments for the cessation of politically relevant drama post-1737 are in part responsible for the critical neglect received by these plays. In addition, throughout the period, drama is widely perceived to have suffered an aesthetic downturn particularly in contrast to the great comedies of the Restoration period. Allardyce Nicoll for example, criticises the first fifty years of the eighteenth century for the poor quality of tragic plays during the period. This book however, is not concerned with establishing the value of the individual texts discussed in relation to a canonical notion of aesthetic literary standards. Similarly, the popularity of a particular play is not taken as an indication of the critical value of an individual text. As Arthur H. Scouten and Robert D. Hume's discussion of the 'Cranky Audiences of 1697–1703' reveals, eighteenth century audiences were fickle customers subject to a changeable and unpredictable sense of aesthetics and impervious to logical explanations or, as many a hapless theatre manager discovered, projections of their theatrical taste. Some of the plays discussed in this book were very popular, others were certainly not a financial success, some not even making the customary third night benefit performance. However, neither contemporary nor modern aesthetic judgements impinge on the topicality of a text. The failure of a play or its rejection by modern critics as a 'dramatised novel' does not negate the usefulness of the text to modern scholarship in terms of tracing literary responses to politics.

Despite the 1737 Act the London theatres persisted in their inhabitation of the role and position of commentator on the nation. The history plays which formed just one strand of this commentary continued to sustain, challenge and develop a fantasy of Brtishness which pervaded contemporary political rhetoric on all levels. So although the assumed position of the audience as BRITONS with its notions of a shared homogenous identity does not reflect the realities of early eighteenth-century society, the audiences nevertheless did share one agenda. One element of their identities was collective. The communal desire of the theatre audience to be 'entertained' is perhaps as close as we can come to a sense of eighteenth-century Britain as a unified nation.

Index