Archives, Numbers, Meaning:
The Eighteenth-Century Playbill at Scale

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In response to the growing prominence of quantification in the humanities, scholars of media and digital culture have highlighted the friction between the cultural and disciplinary roles of data and the epistemologies of humanistic inquiry. Johanna Drucker aptly characterizes the humanities as fields that emphasize "the situated, partial, and constitutive character of knowledge production," while data are often taken to be representations of "observer-independent reality."[1] Lisa Gitelman and Virginia Jackson likewise critique the dominant assumption of data's transparency: data, they insist, "are always already 'cooked' and never entirely 'raw.'"[2] The choices involved in data collection and preparation are not objective; they are shaped by the always subjective, often tacit, and sometimes shared presuppositions of the domain-specialist researcher. Practitioners of computational approaches to literature have shown that analyzing large corpora of texts "at a distance" may reveal phenomena not readily accessible through close reading of individual texts.[3] Yet, the notion of distance fosters an illusion

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[1] Johanna Drucker, "Humanities Approaches to Graphical Display," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (2011), available at *http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/5/1/000091/000091.html*.

[2] Lisa Gitelman and Virginia Jackson, "Introduction" in *"Raw Data" Is an Oxymoron*, ed. Lisa Gitelman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 1–14, quote on2.

[3] The term *distant reading* comes from Franco Moretti's influential *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005). In his more recent *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013), he writes that "distance . . . *is a condition of knowledge*: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems" (48–49; emphasis in original). In the same vein, Matthew L. Jockers has developed a "macroanalytic" methodology that prioritizes analysis of corpora over the reading of individual texts, allowing the emergence of "details that are otherwise unavailable, forgotten, ignored, or impossible to extract"; see Jockers, *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 27.

of objectivity that often occludes the preconditions of such work: the transformation of cultural artifacts into objects in a series that can be embedded into computational spaces.[4] Printed codices must become .txt files; properties of artifacts must be organized into a .csv file. That is, texts, archival materials, and historical individuals must become data, in a process that involves choices about collection, curation, and preparation. The effects of this process seldom have been theorized as part of these large-scale analyses.

To bring a more nuanced understanding of data's mediated and constructed nature to the work of large-scale digital analysis requires a historicized and theorized account of the resources that enable it. New digital collections and databases have undoubtedly presented researchers with powerful ways to explore cultural artifacts, but their interfaces frequently efface the criteria for inclusion and exclusion in their underlying collections, bolstering the illusion that they are authoritative and comprehensive. As a way of accounting for the underlying instability of the digital archive, Bonnie Mak advocates an "archaeological approach" to collections, such as *Early English Books Online*, which bears the traces of earlier catalogs and microfilm resources.[5]

In this essay we model one such approach, theorizing a new dataset of our own creation as a *description* that mediates and transforms our relationship to the objects it describes.[6] While quantitative humanities scholarship is currently preoccupied with how to make meaning from large-scale analyses, we wish to shift attention to the meaning-making problems on the other side of the numbers.[7] Rather than the massive datasets, sophisticated computational models, or rich visualizations that characterize many digital humanities approaches, we offer an account of the preconditions that enable such approaches, and we do so with regard to a single feature—that of genre. In tracing the transformation of archival artifacts into data objects, we argue that a more reflective approach to quantitative analysis opens up new interpretive terrain—terrain that takes advantage of the opportunities available at scale while maintaining the hu-

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[4] David Brewer also asks us to question "the presumptive interchangeability of texts that is required to put them into a series susceptible to quantitative analysis"; see the abstract to Brewer, "Counting, Resonance, and Form: A Speculative Manifesto (with Notes)," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 24, no. 2 (2011–12): 161–70.

[5] Bonnie Mak, "Archaeology of a Digitization," *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 65, no. 8 (2014): 1515–26. See also Ian Gadd, "The Use and Abuse of Early English Books Online," *Literature Compass* 6, no. 3 (2009): 680–92, and "History of Early English Books Online," *Folgerpedia*, March 27, 2015, available at *http://folgerpedia.folger.edu/History_of_Early_English_Books_Online*. Robin Valenza and Brad Pasanek have likewise drawn our attention to the limitations of online text corpora: see Valenza, "How Literature Becomes Knowledge: A Case Study," *English Literary History* 76, no. 1 (2009): 215–45; and Pasanek, *Metaphors of Mind: An Eighteenth-Century Dictionary* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015). As an example of the dangers of working with datasets of obscure provenance, see Eitan Adam Pechenick, Christopher M. Danforth, and Peter Sheridan Dodds, "Characterizing the Google Books Corpus: Strong Limits to Inferences of Socio-Cultural and Linguistic Evolution," *PLoS ONE* 10, no. 10 (October 7, 2015), available at *http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0137041*. Their study points to the mismatch between how the Google Books corpus was curated and the uses to which the Google Ngram Viewer has been put by researchers.

[6] In a similar vein, Laura Mandell has argued that the process of producing digital representations of material texts makes newly visible the relationship between medium and interface and the cognitive work they do; see Mandell, "What Is the Matter? Or, What Literary Theory Neither Hears Nor Sees," *New Literary History* 38, no. 4 (2007): 755–76.

[7] The "meaning-making problem" facing quantitative studies of culture has been highlighted in Alan Liu's "The Meaning of Digital Humanities," *PMLA* 128, no. 2 (2013): 409–23; and Ryan Heuser and Long Le-Khac's *A Quantitative Literary History of 2,958 Nineteenth-Century British Novels: The Semantic Cohort Method* (Stanford Literary Lab, 2012), available at *https://litlab.stanford.edu/LiteraryLabPamphlet4.pdf*.

manities' commitment to ambiguity, mediation, and situatedness.[8] Such an approach is necessary if the digital humanities are to remain humanistic and avoid the worst excesses of data determinism.

Our objects of study are 1,421 archival eighteenth-century playbills from London (916 from Theatre-Royal Drury Lane, 505 from Theatre-Royal Covent Garden) that were collected and curated as data. As we show, the systematic, yet little-known exclusion of playbills from cataloging and mass digitization efforts made such a collection necessary. The data collection and analysis were performed with a central question in mind: What is the relationship between the ascription of genre and authorship in mid-eighteenth-century theatre? Examining these playbills at scale—that is, abstracting hundreds of bills over decades in order to analyze their properties en masse—enables us to track how the categories of authorship and genre operate over time.[9] We find that the inclusion of genre on playbills is a more powerful mode of categorization for eighteenth-century theatrical publics than the inclusion of a named author; in other words, genre does more work on its own to suggest the nature of a play than does the author's name. In order to illustrate how this insight, discovered at scale, can yield deeper understandings of individual theatrical phenomena, we turn to the generically, and authorially, indeterminate dramatic adaptations of Aphra Behn's 1688 novella *Oroonoko*. Over the course of the eighteenth century this novella was adapted to the London and Edinburgh stages at least six times, advertised variously as a tragedy, a tragicomedy, and "a Play." This case study reveals that eighteenth-century theatrical publics had an idiom, previously unrecognized by scholars, for talking about generic ambiguity and even using it to market performances. *Oroonoko* and other plays that similarly challenged conventional generic and authorial categorization were often advertised as "a Play," a seemingly empty label that is revealed to carry significance when these playbills are subjected to quantitative analysis. As we demonstrate throughout this essay, the knowledge claims we can make based on these playbills are products of, and enabled by, our awareness of the highly mediated nature of the dataset. This essay therefore argues for greater transparency and self-reflexivity in humanities data collection, demonstrates the compatibility of such approaches with the typical methods of theatre history and performance studies, and reveals previously unrecognized phenomena about the eighteenth-century stage and its practices of publicity.

The playbill is a useful archival object for examination at scale because, by its very nature, the playbill acts as an index of cultural categories like genre and author. Fur-

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[8] In situating ourselves in this way we are in conversation with Matthew K. Gold, who, in his lecture "Facts, Patterns, Methods, Meaning: Public Knowledge Building in the Digital Humanities," identifies an emerging cohort of digital humanities practitioners who "use the computational tools of the proto-scientific group but in self-reflexive ways that embody the approach of deformative criticism, aiming to highlight interpretative complexity and ambiguity." See Gold, lecture delivered at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, April 17, 2015, available at *http://blog.mkgold.net/2015/04/20/facts-patterns-methods-meaning-public-knowledge-building-in-the-digital-humanities*.

[9] There is already a long history of quantitative analysis in theatre history. For examples immediately relevant to this essay, see Charles Read Baskervill, "Play-Lists and Afterpieces of the Mid-Eighteenth Century," *Modern Philology* 23, no. 4 (1926): 445–64; Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of English Drama, 1660–1900*, 3rd ed., vol. 2: *Early Eighteenth Century Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955); and Robert D. Hume, "Before the Bard: 'Shakespeare' in Early Eighteenth-Century London," *English Literary History* 64, no. 1 (1997): 41–75. In recent years conversations around "counting" and the digital turn have prompted new theoretical attention to the relationship between archival objects and their representation as data.

ther, as Christopher Balme notes, from the advent of print until end of the nineteenth century, "the playbill constituted a central point of articulation between theatres and their public spheres."[10] In the eighteenth century the playbill worked to register and shape the energies of public approval and attention, harnessing both cultural memory and novelty. As such, it was one of the central ways by which concepts like genre and authorial attribution were sustained and transformed.

Our dataset thus yields what John Frow calls "midlevel concepts."[11] Mid-level concepts like genre "hav[e] neither the specificity of the concept of text nor the generality of the concepts of literature or of the social."[12] These are open-ended "framing conditions" that make interpretation and knowledge possible; they are not given, preexisting structures, but are constituted in the moment of interpretation. Our study attends to the mid-level concepts of authorship and genre, and traces the transformation of these categories over time and for different publics in order to reveal what we call "categorical resonance."[13] Such resonance can be made visible by looking at cultural objects described as metadata in a series; that is, at scale we are not measuring the footprint of a single work, but rather are measuring the work done by concepts as they endure or transform. At scale we can view those categories over time to capture shifts and moments of coherence and incoherence within the culture.

This approach, in its focus on mediation and resonance instead of disappearance and evanescence, shares an affinity with the challenge made by Gina Bloom, Anston Bosman, and William West to the "always already disappearing" notion of performance.[14] We embrace abstraction from the cultural object as an opportunity to focus attention on operable categories over time within culture. Like Bloom, Bosman, and West, we attend to how performance, as indexed by the playbill, "does not take place in an instant, as an event, but recalls, lingers, and persists, expanding and even exploding the confines of synchronic temporality."[15]

It has been difficult to consider playbills at scale because they were excluded from the catalogs that form the basis for mass digitization efforts. The absence of playbills from *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* (*ECCO*), as well as from its pre-1700 counterpart *Early English Books Online* (*EEBO*), is a result of the decision, as reported by R. C. Alston, not to include them in the *English Short Title Catalog* (*ESTC*) on which those collections are built.[16] Alston recalls that the unusually high survival rate of playbills

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[10] Christopher Balme, "Playbills and the Theatrical Public Sphere," in *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance History*, ed. Charlotte M. Canning and Thomas Postlewait (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 37–62, quote on 39.

[11] John Frow, "On Midlevel Concepts," *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010): 237–52, quote on 248.

[12] Ibid.

[13] The cultural work done by the categories we discover at scale can be thought of in terms of what Wai Chee Dimock dubs "resonance"; see Dimock, "A Theory of Resonance," *PMLA* 112, no. 5 (1997): 1060–71. Our concept of categorical resonance preserves the sense of cultural meaning accrued over time central to Dimock's notion and places it in conversation with Frow's theorization of mid-level concepts.

[14] Gina Bloom, Anston Bosman, and William N. West, "Ophelia's Intertheatricality: Or, How Performance Is History," *Theatre Journal* 65, no. 2 (2013): 165–82, quote on 167.

[15] Ibid., 167–68.

[16] R. C. Alston, "The Eighteenth-Century Non-Book: Observations on Printed Ephemera," in *The Book and the Book Trade in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Giles Barber and Bernhard Fabian (Hamburg: Dr. Ernst Hauswedell & Co., 1981), 343–60, quote on 344–45. The *ESTC* does in fact include "Playbills" among its categories of genre; but a search conducted on December 22, 2015, within that genre yielded only 177 items dating from between 1750 and 1800, of which only four were from England. Likewise, a keyword search for "Playbill" yielded thirty-two results, and "Playbills" yielded seventy-seven; the bulk of these results were for items that proved not to be playbills.

actually worked against their inclusion in the *ESTC* during its creation in the 1970s. Often thought of as fragile in their ephemerality, playbills actually "seem to have been preserved more consistently than any other category of ephemera."[17] The compilers of the *ESTC* decided to catalog approximately 250,000 ephemeral materials like pamphlets and ballads, but balked at including playbills, which would have added nearly 50,000 items from the British Library and the Victoria and Albert Museum alone.[18] This decision has had serious ramifications for the study of British culture in the ensuing thirty years: ballads and pamphlets are now the basis of numerous serious studies by scholars in literature and history, while playbills are not.

Recent theorizations of ephemera are focused almost exclusively on broadside ballads, chapbooks, almanacs, and newspapers—not coincidentally, materials that are widely available in electronic collections.[19] Alston's account reminds us that playbills are infrequently studied today because they were *made* less accessible and less institutionally supported than other kinds of items. While they once shared a visual field with the other cheaply printed materials of early modern London, such as libels and advertisements,[20] today they are nearly invisible to scholars who can access those other cheap prints with the click of a button. As a result, playbills have not achieved the status of a legitimate, coherent, accessible, well-theorized archive, even though they have the capacity to provide a wealth of insights into public knowledge and feeling about the theatre.

When theatre historians have drawn on playbills, they have tended to treat these objects as mere documentation rather than as a cultural and textual phenomenon worth examination in its own right. Viewing these objects primarily as historical documents indicative of past performances, theatre scholars have seldom attended to playbills'

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[17] Michael Twyman, "Printed Ephemera," in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, vol. 5: *1695–1830*, ed. Michael F. Suarez, S.J. and Michael L. Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 66–82, quote on 69. Kevin Murphy and Sally O'Driscoll point out that the term *ephemera* may itself misdirect our attention: "[t]he conceptual slide associated with the category title *ephemera* distorts our vision of the material by drawing us to think about the fact that much of it did not survive, rather than reminding us to attend to the important ways it functioned when it was produced"; see Murphy and O'Driscoll, "Introduction: 'Fugitive Pieces' and 'Gaudy Books': Textual, Historical, and Visual Interpretations of Ephemera in the Long Eighteenth Century," in *Studies in Ephemera: Text and Image in Eighteenth-Century Print*, ed. Kevin D. Murphy and Sally O'Driscoll (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2013), 1–30, quote on 4 (emphasis in original).

[18] Alston, "The Eighteenth-Century Non-Book," 344–45.

[19] In addition to Murphy and O'Driscoll's introduction to *Studies in Ephemera*, see Michael Harris, "Printed Ephemera," in *The Oxford Companion to the Book*, vol. 1, ed. Michael F. Suarez, S.J. and H. R. Woudhuysen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 120–28; and Paula McDowell, "Of Grubs and Other Insects: Constructing the Categories of 'Ephemera' and 'Literature' in Eighteenth-Century British Writing," in *Studies in Ephemera*, 31–54. The near-invisibility of playbills as archival resources is further illustrated by the startling fact that the massive Maurice Rickards and Michael Twyman, eds., *Encyclopedia of Ephemera: A Guide to the Fragmentary Documents of Everyday Life for the Collector, Curator, and Historian* (New York: Routledge, 2000) does not contain an entry on playbills.

[20] Tiffany Stern, *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 55. Libels in this period were satirical or defamatory prints that were often posted and circulated in the same public spaces as playbills, such as boards and posts, coffeehouses, booksellers' stalls, and the playhouses themselves. See George Winchester Stone Jr., "Introduction," in *The London Stage, 1660–1800: A Calendar of Plays, Entertainments, and Afterpieces, Together with Casts, Box-Receipts, and Contemporary Comment, Compiled from the Playbills, Newspapers, and Theatrical Diaries of the Period*, Part 4: *1747–1776*, ed. George Winchester Stone Jr. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), lvi.

agency in the process of producing critical, aesthetic, economic, and authorial categories within cultural awareness. In order to avoid this longstanding insistence on regarding playbills as transparent representations of performance events, our approach draws on the work of Jacky Bratton, who views the playbill as a source of insight into "those most difficult and evanescent aspects of theatre history," such as "the expectations and disposition of the audience,"[21] and also on the work of Balme, who emphasizes playbills' "internal textuality, interreferentiality, and communication structures."[22] Both Bratton and Balme move beyond earlier positivistic understandings of theatrical ephemera and point us to the meaning-making potential of playbills in public circulation. As each recognizes, the playbill as form captures multiple temporalities: it points to a future event (the performance), while simultaneously memorializing that event. Our analysis attends to yet another layer of temporality by focusing on the categorical resonance operating in the bills over time; such resonance is founded in the material basis of the object, but finds its expression in the virtuality of the public sphere.[23]

We demonstrate how the categories registered by playbills operate in the world, not only synchronically at the moment of production and circulation, but over time. The diachronic axis made visible at scale cannot be captured by closely reading a single or even multiple bills; the manner in which the structures of the playbill resonate on this axis is only visible at the scale of hundreds of bills over decades. This method is particularly useful because describing features of the playbill as metadata, and then subjecting that metadata to quantitative analysis allows not only for scalability, but comparability across archival holdings of playbills. That is, the categorical resonances we find through our analysis of our particular dataset may be compared directly with findings from datasets derived from other archives. Given the absence of playbills from databases and cataloging efforts, such comparability is crucial. In our analysis, what persists over time is the categorical work, made material in the playbills, that classifies and makes sense of performance for a culture.[24] Thus our quantitative approach does not seek to give an account (or a count) of performances; instead, it demonstrates trends in theatrical advertising practices that in turn yield insights into public knowledge about the theatre.[25] Before presenting our analysis of these trends, we first offer a transparent and self-reflexive account of the data collection and curation for the reasons expressed earlier in the essay.

[21] Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 29.

[22] Balme, "Playbills and the Theatrical Public Sphere," 48.

[23] Similarly to Balme, Murphy and O'Driscoll claim in their introduction that ephemera in general "participate in the *constitution* of public space, and become part of the public sphere" (8; emphasis in original).

[24] The playbill is necessarily a product of multiple hands. As Stone notes of this division of labor, "managers instructed the prompter to prepare notices for the daily papers, as well as for the printer retained by the theatre to print handbills. . . . Type arrangement and sizes may have been suggested by the prompter's manuscript bill, but were probably determined by the printer"; see Stone, "Introduction," lxxii, lxxiv.

[25] There is evidence that audiences demanded the playbill to be an accurate and up-to-date reflection of the performance, and there is also evidence that managers and prompters obliged (see ibid., lxxiii–lxxvi). While acknowledging this pragmatic function, we argue that the playbill exceeds its purely informational purpose and does meaningful cultural work. Drawing on Emma Lesley Depledge's approach, we attend to the "shrewd, media-sensitive marketing strategies" evident in the playbills; see Depledge, "Playbills, Prologues, and Playbooks: Selling Shakespeare Adaptations, 1678–82," *Philological Quarterly* 91, no. 2 (2012): 305–30, quote on 306.

Data were collected during an archival visit to the Houghton Library at Harvard University to work with 1,421 eighteenth-century playbills held in the Harvard Theatre Collection.[26] Over the course of a month in July 2012 the playbills, which are held in boxes though not individually cataloged, were manually transcribed into spreadsheets.[27] The Houghton is one of the largest collections of playbills in the world and comes from multiple donors; the two bequests that make up the bulk of the collection are Robert Gould Shaw and Evert Jansen Wendell.[28] The collection has been made available in microfilm to scholars since 1982, and is further supplemented with facsimiles of playbills held by the Huntington Library in California.

Our dataset was structured to yield answers to questions about the content and transformation of playbills over time; these questions are shaped by those posed by theatre historians of our own and earlier periods. For instance, in thinking about Elizabethan and Jacobean playbills, of which few are extant, Tiffany Stern imagines what could be learned from these documents: "[w]e would know which aspects of the play the bill deemed worthy of advertisement and which it rejected: were companies or theaters cited in the bill, were parts of the play's story selected as important, were playwrights named on the bill?"[29] Moving forward to the late seventeenth century, evidence from a letter by John Dryden suggests that the appearance of an author's name on a playbill was a new practice in 1699: "This Day was playd a reviv'd Comedy of Mr. Congreve's calld the Double Dealer, which was never very takeing; in the play bill was printed,—Written by Mr Congreve . . . the printing an Authours name, in a Play bill, is a new manner of proceeding, at least in England."[30]

It was a practice that did not catch on. According to Restoration and eighteenth-century theatre historian Robert Hume, by 1710 "one play in twelve [8 percent] was advertised with its author's name attached."[31] Our data from later in the eighteenth century show an even lower frequency of authorial attribution: in the period from 1737 to 1774, only 6 percent of Drury Lane playbills name the author of the mainpiece, and 3 percent list the author of the afterpiece. Over the same period at Covent Garden, authors are advertised even less frequently: 3.6 percent of playbills list a mainpiece author, and 1.9 percent list the author of the afterpiece. It is important to note that the attribution of authorship does not serve a purely informational purpose, as we might conclude if it neatly tracked onto the freshness or familiarity of a given play. A repertory play like *The Alchemist* might be known to audiences, but the author's name may still appear alongside information like genre and cast list.[32] Likewise, the popular

[26] In addition to Harvard's collection, there are significant collections of playbills at the Huntington Library, Folger Shakespeare Library, British Library, Walpole Library, Princeton University's Special Collections, Bodleian Library's John Johnson collection, and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

[27] This data collection and archival work was conducted by Mark Vareschi and made possible by the generosity of the University of Wisconsin–Madison Graduate School.

[28] Personal communication with Micah Hoggatt, reference librarian of the Houghton Library, Harvard University, September 10, 2013.

[29] Tiffany Stern, "'On each Wall and Corner Poast': Playbills, Title Pages, and Advertising in Early Modern London," *English Literary Renaissance* 36, no. 1 (2006): 57–89, quote on 59.

[30] Letter dated March 4, 1698/9, in Charles E. Ward, ed., *The Letters of John Dryden, with Letters Addressed to Him* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1942), 112–13.

[31] Hume, "Before the Bard," 55.

[32] In our dataset of Drury Lane playbills there are six bills advertising *The Alchemist* between March 1753 and December 1763. Of these six, three name Ben Jonson as the author. There is no attribution of authorship on the playbill for March 20, 1753, but the following phrase appears on playbills for

afterpiece *Miss in Her Teens* was staged regularly, yet the playbills do not name its celebrity author, David Garrick.

In order to arrive at findings such as these it is necessary to describe the archival artifacts as items in a spreadsheet. The playbill for Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife* (fig. 1) illustrates the level of abstraction necessary to enact this transformation. The playbill as a form is remarkably stable across the period, the only variation being the addition of the printed year in the 1760s. The playbill in figure 1 is taken as an example because it contains most of the categories of information that *could* be present on an eighteenth-century playbill, including:

- Novelty (signaled by the phrase "Acted but once these fifteen years")
- Benefit (for Mr. and Mrs. Cross)
- Theatre (the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane)
- Date of performance (day of the week and date are printed; year is written in by hand)
- Mainpiece genre (comedy)
- Familiarity ("reviv'd")[33]
- Mainpiece title (*Rule a Wife and Have a Wife*)
- Mainpiece authors (Beaumont and Fletcher)
- Mainpiece cast list
- Dancing ("the New Sailor's Dance," with an indication that it is performed by request "At the particular Desire of several Persons of Quality" [a conventional phrase on playbills of the period])
- Afterpiece (*The Apprentice*)
- Afterpiece genre (farce)
- Information on how to purchase admission ("Tickets and Places to be had of Mr. VARNEY at the Stage door")

One detail missing from this playbill, but that appears very occasionally, is the author of the afterpiece.

In our spreadsheet (table 1) this playbill is represented in a series of cells, with some of the categories of information represented in the column headers: date and year of performance, as well as title, genre, and author information for the mainpiece and afterpiece. The theatre at which the play was performed is also retained, as we maintained separate spreadsheets for each playhouse. The "Notes" column records significant advertising information that headlines or signals something unique about the playbill. As is evident in the table, there is a reduction in the amount of information presented in the dataset when compared to the image of the playbill. We lose the signals of familiarity, the cast list, the indication of dancing between mainpiece and

December 20, 1755, February 5, 1756, and March 7, 1757: "The Alchymist. (Written by Ben Johnson.)." Two playbills, dated October 16, 1761 and December 17, 1763, do not attribute the authorship of the play to Jonson.

[33] Crucial to understanding the advertising strategies represented in these playbills is an awareness of the ongoing tension between novelty and familiarity that characterized the eighteenth-century theatre. A playbill for the October 28, 1756 performance of *King Lear* suggests just this tension. The bill identifies the play as a tragedy, and dubs the afterpiece, *The Anatomist*, a farce. It further announces the mainpiece as "King Lear With Restorations From Shakespear" and specifies that it is "Not Acted This Season." This phrasing gestures simultaneously at the long history of the play, its revisions, and the freshness of the performance. Present on the bill are the markers of genre and the ambiguous attribution of the play to Shakespeare ("With Restorations From Shakespear") that serve to obscure whether the play is restored to an approximation of Shakespeare's intent or restored to fit the contemporary taste.

Acted but Once these *FIFTEEN TEARS.*
For the BENEFIT of
Mr. CROSS, *Prompter*; and Mrs. CROSS.

Theatre Royal in *Drury-Lane,*
This present *Monday,* being the 26th of *April, 1756*
Will be *Reviv'd* a COMEDY, call'd
Rule a Wife and have a Wife.
(Written by BEAUMONT and FLETCHER.)
Leon by Mr. GARRICK,
(Being the Second *Time* of his appearing in that Character.)
Duke by Mr. HAVARD,
Cacafogo by Mr. BERRY,
The COPPER CAPTAIN
By Mr. WOODWARD,
(Being the Second *Time* of his appearing in that Character.)
Old Woman by Mr. YATES,
Margaretta by Mrs. DAVIES.
Estifania Mrs. PRITCHARD.
(Being the First *Time* of her appearing in that Character.)
End of the Play, the New SAILOR'S *Dance.*
To which (*At the particular Desire of several Persons of Quality*) will be
added a Farce of two Acts, call'd
The APPRENTICE.
With the Additional Scene.
The PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS by
Mr. WOODWARD,
Mr. YATES,
Mr. BURTON, &c. &c.
Tickets and Places to be had of Mr. VARNEY at the Stage door.

Figure 1. Playbill for *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife*.
(Source: Houghton Library, TCS 63, Harvard University.)

afterpiece, and information about ticketing. In addition to this categorical loss, we lose the size of the bill and the quality and feel of the paper. We further lose the formatting aspects of the playbill; its emphases on certain information through both type size and placement on the page are not maintained. For example, in the bill, Mr. GARRICK, Mr. WOODWARD, Mrs. PRITCHARD, and The APPRENTICE are presented in the largest type on the page. The prominence of star performers may appear to support the longstanding consensus that, as Allardyce Nicoll argues and Robert Hume insists, "[t]his was an *actors'* theater in which many members of the core audience went again and again to see the same small group of favorite performers in an ever-rotating series of showcase roles."[34] Yet, as our example in figure 1 illustrates, the playbill is a source of much more than just information about actors and their roles; it is a rich site of information about the constitution and transformation of a host of theatrical categories.

Our description of the playbills as data seeks to preserve, as much as possible, the printed playbill as a pointer at its moment of operation and circulation, even as we recognize that the effects of how they were collected and preserved cannot be neglected. For the most part, the dataset occludes handwritten emendations by collectors and archivists because the printed playbill points to a future event, whereas handwritten additions point to the impulse to archive the event. However, our spreadsheet (table 1) does include handwritten years—both those dated by an eighteenth-century hand and those dated by catalogers—for bills printed before 1767, the point at which the inclusion of year became generally standardized.[35] The table makes the distinction invisible: a printed year, a year written by a contemporary collector, and a date written by a cataloger all look like the same four-digit datapoint. This represents a useful and necessary reduction of complexity, without which the dataset would yield less fruitful analyses.[36]

While the playbills lack the lexical diversity and raw word count of, say, a novel, they do (to draw on Bratton) evince a complexity and diversity of kinds of information that pose real questions for quantitative analysis. Although our dataset is relatively small, each playbill is described by nine possible fields, which means that even with the partial transcription of each playbill, we are looking at over 12,000 possible datapoints.

Our results are based on hand counts from each dataset.[37] Our key findings for Drury Lane and Covent Garden during the period between 1737 and 1774 measure the prevalence of ascription of genre and the attribution of authorship to mainpieces and afterpieces. We have already shown the relative infrequency of authorial attribution on playbills for mainpieces and afterpieces. Generic appellation is far more common and bears an intriguing relationship to authorial attribution. For Drury Lane mainpieces, the likelihood that a given playbill will indicate a genre is, on average, 53.8 percent; when an author's name is present on a playbill, the likelihood that it will also indicate

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[34] Hume, "Before the Bard," 45–46 (emphasis in original); Nicoll, *Early Eighteenth Century Drama*, 39.

[35] In his introduction, Stone dates the regular inclusion of the printed date to after 1766 (lxxii).

[36] We have checked subsets of the dataset against *The London Stage, 1660–1800* and discovered no discrepancies to date. If the handwritten years were penciled in by catalogers after 1960, they may themselves have been based on information from *The London Stage* (which is in turn based largely on periodical advertisements).

[37] We are working with observations of archival objects that have been shaped by individual collectors' priorities. As with any archival holdings, this collection of playbills is not complete; the collection is therefore subject to an unknown degree of sampling error.

Table 1. Sample row from the spreadsheet for Drury Lane playbills.

Year	Date	Play	Genre Play	Afterpiece	Genre Afterpiece	Attrib Mainpiece Author	Attrib Afterpiece Author	Notes
1756	26-Apr	Rule a Wife and Have a Wife	Comedy	The Apprentice	Farce	Yes, "Rule a Wife and have a Wife. (Written by Beaumont and Fletcher.)"	No	"Acted but Once these Fifteen Years. For the Benefit of Mr. Cross, Prompter; and Mrs. Cross"

a genre rises sharply to 91.1 percent. For Drury Lane afterpieces we see a similar re-
lationship: while 54.5 percent of all playbills list a genre for the afterpiece, 80 percent
of playbills that name an author for the afterpiece also include an appellation of its
genre.[38] In short, slightly more than half of the time, genre is listed on playbills from
Drury Lane; the presence of the author's name, however, dramatically increases the
likelihood of the work's genre also appearing.

Our analysis of Covent Garden yields similar results, although we must treat these
as suggestive, but not conclusive due to the limited number of observations for each
possible case.[39] We find that the likelihood of listing genre for the mainpiece is normally
44.4 percent, and it goes up to 50 percent if an author is listed. For afterpieces the like-
lihood of listing genre is around 68.5 percent (quite a bit higher than for mainpieces),
but rises to 88.9 percent if an author is listed. Playbills for Covent Garden, then, exhibit
a pattern of correlation similar to those from Drury Lane, particularly in the case of
afterpieces. This result may be skewed, however, because of the very small sample of
playbills that list an author for the afterpiece.

Based on the numbers for both theatres, we might posit that the name of an author
does not stand alone, but that its presence attracts the category of genre; that is, the
naming of an author of either the mainpiece or afterpiece increases the likelihood that
a playbill will also label the genre of that piece; this pattern generally holds true for
both theatres. We find that the reverse of this relationship is weaker. In the case of
Drury Lane mainpieces about 6.1 percent of playbills name an author—a number that
rises slightly, to 10.3 percent, when a genre is also present. At the same theatre only 3
percent of all playbills name the author of the afterpiece, but 4.4 percent of those that
indicate the afterpiece genre also include the author's name. At Covent Garden the
link is even weaker: the likelihood of listing the author rises only marginally from 3.6
percent of all mainpiece plays to 4 percent of those that list a genre. As in the case of
mainpieces, the odds of naming an author for the afterpiece are very slightly higher

[38] A Chi-square test (which is a standard statistical test for measuring the likelihood that the observed
association is due to chance) reveals a statistically significant association between genre and author
for both Drury Lane mainpieces and afterpieces. A p-value below 0.05 indicates that the association is
statistically significant and is therefore unlikely to be due to chance. (Mainpieces: $n = 916$, $p = 1.778e-082$; afterpieces: $n = 873$, $p = 0.01146$.)

[39] The association between genre and author was not statistically significant for Covent Garden main-
pieces or afterpieces (mainpieces: $n = 505$, $p = 0.8032$; afterpieces: $n = 480$, $p = 0.3347$). Covent Garden
offered a limited number of observations for each possible case (for example, only one afterpiece listed
an author, but no genre), making it difficult to calculate the association's significance. This means that
our findings are suggestive though not conclusive for Covent Garden. For this reason our case study
is taken from Drury Lane, and our analysis rests more heavily on the data from Drury Lane playbills.

when a genre is present: 2.4 versus 1.9 percent. In other words, the existence of a genre on a playbill only makes it slightly more likely that the playbill will name an author. While the presence of an author's name provokes the need for information about genre, the presence of a genre seldom provokes the need for an authorial attribution.

One might suggest that these two kinds of information—genre and author—tend to appear together on more detailed playbills; yet, genres and authors do not co-occur all the time or in an equivalent or reciprocal fashion. The co-occurrence and non-co-occurrence of these two categories is a product of advertising practice and public understanding. Within the context of these eighteenth-century playbills genre is more likely to be able to stand on its own than can the name of an author. Genre, then, does categorical work on its own that authors' names do not. Knowing that a play is a tragedy provides more information about its shape than knowing that it was written by, say, Philip Massinger; furthermore, the knowledge that the play is attributed to a particular author seems to provoke further curiosity about its genre than if no author had been named at all.

We have suggested above that authors' names attract generic appellation on playbills from the middle decades of the eighteenth century, but that the reverse relationship is not as pronounced. By way of explanation we have posited that genre is a more standalone mode of categorizing a play than an author is. The genre, in other words, pulls more cultural weight: it bears the accretions, not necessarily of the single work but of all the tragedies, comedies, and so on that have come before. These numerical findings provide new insights into the advertising practices of Drury Lane and Covent Garden in the mid-to-late eighteenth century and offer information about the prevalence of authorial attribution and generic appellation not studied before. We can see these advertising practices in action by turning to the publicity around the adaptations of Thomas Southerne's *Oroonoko.*

Southerne's 1696 dramatic adaptation is marked by its departure from Behn's 1688 novella: Oroonoko's wife Imoinda is made white, the backstory of the incidents leading to Oroonoko's enslavement in Africa is excised, and significantly for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century critics, a comic subplot is added. Congreve's epilogue, printed in the 1696 first edition, acknowledges critics' potential discomfort with the split-plot form:

> We weep, and laugh, joyn mirth and grief together,
> Like Rain and Sunshine mixt, in *April* weather.
> Your different tasts divide our Poet's Cares:
> One foot the Sock, t'other the Buskins wears:
> Thus, while he strives to please, he's forc'd to do't,
> Like *Volscius,* hip-hop, in a single Boot.
> Cryticks, he knows, for this may damn his Books:
> But he makes Feasts for Friends, and not for Cooks.[40]

As Congreve's epilogue demonstrates, the play's generic ambiguity (given its mixing of tragedy and comedy) bore comment from its outset.[41] Despite concerns about critical

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[40] Thomas Southerne, *Oroonoko: A Tragedy. As it is Acted at the Theatre-Royal, by His Majesty's Servants* (London: Printed for H. Playford, B. Tooke, and S. Buckley, 1696), 85.

[41] Restoration split-plot tragicomedy was a distinct form from the tragicomic structure popularized by Beaumont and Fletcher in the first half of the seventeenth century. Whereas earlier tragicomedy incorporated tragic events, including deaths, into a plot arc that ended happily, the split-plot form that emerged after 1660 alternated between two largely separate plots: one comedic, one tragic.

disapprobation, the split plot was viewed as marketable and appealing to theatrical audiences; as Congreve notes, Southerne "makes Feasts for Friends, and not for Cooks."

Oroonoko quickly entered the repertory and continued to be performed regularly into the eighteenth century, but its genre remained a vexed category. Congreve's epilogue, along with evidence from playbills, newspaper advertisements, and contemporary critical commentary, suggests that genre was a useful concept that allowed both audiences and critics to locate pieces within the performance tradition, although specialist and nonspecialist publics might value differently the adherence to, or departure from, familiar generic forms.[42] Periodical advertisements of the performances demonstrate the manner in which the ambiguous genre of the play was marked. In July 1711 the *Spectator* carried two advertisements for the July 6th performance of "a Play call'd Oroonoko." In November 1717 *The Daily Courant* advertised a performance of the play at Lincoln's Inn Fields, calling it "a Tragedy"; however, the marketing of "a Play call'd Oroonoko" reappeared in *The Daily Courant* in October 1720 and May 1722. In April 1724 the same periodical advertised the play without listing a genre.

The advertisement of *Oroonoko* as "a Play" is more significant than it may initially appear. The function of this label (as in "a Play call'd Oroonoko") as a generic category has gone previously unacknowledged in accounts of *Oroonoko* and other plays of mixed or uncertain genre. The analysis of our dataset reveals the deployment of this seeming noncategory as a classification that was useful to eighteenth-century theatrical publics. "A Play," we argue, does the work of registering the ambiguity and unsettled nature of forms like split-plot tragicomedy; it, like referring to *Macbeth* on a playbill as "a Tragedy," works to shape audience expectations.

The playbills from Drury Lane in our dataset, for example, list forty-one pieces as "a Play." Pieces designated as "a Play" include such generically ambiguous and often-adapted works like *Romeo and Juliet* (12 times), *The Rehearsal* (6), *The Merchant of Venice* (4), *Measure for Measure* (3), and *Philaster* (3).[43] *Oroonoko*, called "a Play" some nine times, follows *Romeo and Juliet* as the second-most common piece with this designation.

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[42] Scholars continue to offer myriad interpretations of the significance of the play's split-plot form, demonstrating the ongoing interest in *Oroonoko*'s genre: the comic subplot satirizes the entrance of women into the literary marketplace; see Mary Vermillion, "Buried Heroism: Critiques of Female Authorship in Southerne's Adaptation of Behn's *Oroonoko*," *Restoration* 16, no. 1 (1992): 28–37, quote on 28. It allows the return of the repressed "social and economic imperatives . . . structuring the colonial plantation economy"; see Suvir Kaul, "Reading Literary Symptoms: Colonial Pathologies and the *Oroonoko* Fictions of Behn, Southerne, and Hawkesworth," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 13, no. 3 (1994): 80–96, quote on 80. It retains the ambiguities of Behn's framing conventions "[t]o preserve *Oroonoko*'s double focus on social critique and on individual tragedy"; see Marta Figlerowicz, "'Frightful Spectacles of a Mangled King': Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and Narration through Theater," *New Literary History* 39, no. 2 (2008): 321–34, quote on 330. Or in its contrast with heroic tragedy, it highlights the loss of "traditional heroic values"; see Julia A. Rich, "Heroic Tragedy in Southerne's *Oroonoko* (1695): An Approach to a Split-Plot Tragicomedy," *Philological Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (1983): 187–200, quote on 188.

[43] Frederick Samuel Boas identified *Measure for Measure* as a "problem play" in 1896; see Boas, *Shakspere and His Predecessors* (London: Murray, 1896). In 1931 William Witherle Lawrence noted *Measure for Measure* as a "problem comedy"; see Lawrence, *Shakespeare's Problem Comedies* (New York: Macmillan, 1931). Susan Snyder argues that *Romeo and Juliet* is a comedy diverted to tragedy, in *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies:* Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Othello, *and* King Lear (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979). Various critics have similarly pointed to the aspects of *The Merchant of Venice* that may make it a problem play. *The Rehearsal* is a backstage drama and thus defies generic convention. *Philaster*, as a Jacobean tragicomedy, presents similar generic mixing and ambiguity.

Like *Oroonoko*, *Romeo and Juliet* existed in multiple competing versions throughout the course of the eighteenth century.[44]

Our dataset supports a view of "a Play" as a generic category rather than as a lack of generic appellation. During the period under consideration, genre was a less de facto category on playbills for Covent Garden performances than those of Drury Lane. Of the 281 playbills from Drury Lane in the 1750s, only nineteen list no genre, whereas nearly half of the playbills from Covent Garden during the same period designate no genre (fifty-nine out of 113). Where the typical practice is to list a genre on a playbill, a play that resists categorization bears the appellation of "a Play," whereas when not listing a genre is a possibility, as at Covent Garden, both plays with problematic and nonproblematic genres may bear no appellation at all. For instance, the dataset includes playbills for three performances of *Romeo and Juliet* at Covent Garden at the beginning of the 1753–54 season, but none of those playbills lists a genre.[45] To reiterate: when genre is a standard designation on playbills, "a Play" stands for the ambiguity of a piece's genre. The fact that this pattern holds in newspaper reviews and advertisements further indicates that "a Play" was an idiom in use across the theatrical media landscape.

As newspaper advertisements and playbills used the label "a Play" to register the generic indeterminacy of *Oroonoko* critics also took note of its mixed form, and by the middle of the eighteenth century, criticism of *Oroonoko*'s generic illegibility had intensified.[46] In April 1752 *The Gentleman's Magazine* called for a new adaptation of the play that would excise the comic subplot, arguing that Southerne himself would have preferred a more coherent form if it were not for the need to appeal to audiences: "[w]ith such a taste was Mr *Southerne* forced (much against his inclination) to comply, whose tragedy of OROONOKO, if stripped of all the low wit and dull obscenity, would be an excellent performance."[47]

In response to the perceived "structural defect" in the play's form, a new set of adaptations emerged.[48] John Hawkesworth's 1759 *Oroonoko* removed the comic subplot and added 600 lines.[49] The play debuted on December 1, 1759, with David Garrick

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[44] See, for example, Jean I. Marsden, *The Re-Imagined Text: Shakespeare, Adaptation, and Eighteenth-Century Literary Theory* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 87–91; and Jenny Davidson, "Shakespeare Adaptation," in *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Fiona Richie and Peter Sabor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 185–203, quote on 186.

[45] In general, the appellation of "genre"—including the appellation "a Play"—became less common at both Drury Lane and Covent Garden in around the 1760s. *Romeo and Juliet* at Drury Lane was "a Play" through September 1760; then beginning in October of the same year, the designation dropped out and did not return.

[46] For example, the author of *A Comparison Between the Two Stages* (London, 1702; frequently attributed to theatre critic Charles Gildon) noted: "the Comick Part is below that Author's usual Genius," 30.

[47] "Observations on the Tragedy of Oroonoko," *The Gentleman's Magazine, and Historical Chronicle* 22 (April 1752): 163–67, quote on 163. The writer of this essay also calls for the comedic subplot to be excerpted and presented on its own: "[i]f a manager should be afraid of seeing a thin house for want of something ludicrous, a farce composed out of the abovementioned under-plot might answer his purpose, and make the audience laugh after the tragedy" (163). Although the writer is unaware of it, this had actually happened a decade earlier, in 1742, with *The Sexes Mis-Match'd*. See Robert Jordan and Harold Love, eds., "Introduction," in *The Works of Thomas Southerne*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 96–97.

[48] Joyce Green MacDonald, "Race, Women, and the Sentimental in Thomas Southerne's *Oroonoko*," *Criticism* 40, no. 4 (1998): 555–70, quote on 555.

[49] Critics have variously read Hawkesworth's revision as: expressing abolitionist views (G. J. Finch, "Hawkesworth's Adaptation of Southerne's *Oroonoko*," *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Theatre*

in the role of Oroonoko, and it appears to have been successful with audiences, as it played eight times that month. Critics also approved of *Oroonoko* "with Alterations"; an anonymous review, possibly by Samuel Johnson,[50] responded positively and again noted the propriety of removing the comic subplot: "[t]hat it was necessary to alter it, cannot be denied: the tragic action was interrupted, not only by comic scenes, but by scenes of the lowest buffoonery, and the grossest indecency."[51] Hawkesworth had successfully created the coherent tragedy that critics had hoped for since Southerne's adaptation of Behn.

Hawkesworth's revision of *Oroonoko* was followed by several more adaptions: the never-performed, anonymous 1760 *Oroonoko*; Francis Gentleman's *The Royal Slave*, which debuted in Edinburgh in 1760 and came to London in 1769; the also anonymous 1767 *The Royal Captive* performed once at the Haymarket; John Ferriar's 1787 *The Prince of Angola*; and Thomas Bellamy's 1789 *The Benevolent Planters*.[52] Yet, Southerne's version persisted alongside these offshoots. Jane Spencer notes that "the revisions of Southerne did not replace the original play on the stage. During the 1760s Hawkesworth's version played at Drury Lane while Southerne's original continued at Covent Garden, and in the 1770s and 1780s Southerne's version became once more the one most regularly performed."[53]

The frequent adaptation and re-adaptation of *Oroonoko* have created a challenge for scholars wishing to distinguish these various post-1759 iterations from one another. While later versions alter the title along with the plot to offer some clues, Hawkesworth's and Southerne's *Oroonoko* were performed throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century under the same title, leading to inconsistent counts of performances.[54] Indeed, both Spencer and Basker have noted this issue and suggested possible ways of distinguishing among the Southerne, Hawkesworth, and Gentleman versions in the records collected in *The London Stage, 1660–1800*.[55] While this indeterminacy is a

Research 16, no. 1 [1977]: 40–43; J. R. Oldfield, "The 'Ties of Soft Humanity': Slavery and Race in British Drama, 1760–1800," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 56, no. 1 [1993]: 1–14, quote on 2-3); repressing the economic system that enables the institution of slavery (Kaul, "Reading Literary Symptoms," 92); or placing sentimental emphasis on Imoinda's sexual vulnerability (MacDonald, "Race, Women, and the Sentimental," 558–63).

[50] James G. Basker, "Intimations of Abolitionism in 1759: Johnson, Hawkesworth, and *Oroonoko*," *The Age of Johnson* 12 (2001): 47–66, quote on 47.

[51] "Art. X. Oroonoko, a Tragedy, as It Is Now Acted at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane," *The Critical Review, or, Annals of Literature* 8 (December 1759): 480–86, quote on 480.

[52] Oldfield, "The 'Ties of Soft Humanity,'" 4–5. The adaptations continue into the present with Biyi Bandele's *Aphra Behn's Oroonoko*, first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1999.

[53] Also noting the continued performance life of Southerne's *Oroonoko* are: Jane Spencer, *Aphra Behn's Afterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 255; Oldfield, "The 'Ties of Soft Humanity,'" 4; Basker, "Intimations of Abolitionism," 59; and Susan B. Iwanisziw, "The Eighteenth-Century Marketing of *Oroonoko*: Contending Constructions of Maecenas, the Author and the Slave," in *Troping* Oroonoko *from Behn to Bandele*, ed. Susan B. Iwanisziw (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2004), 141–73, quote on 156.

[54] Diana Jaher states that *Oroonoko* was "performed at least 315 times during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and frequently was adapted" ("The Paradoxes of Slavery in Thomas Southerne's *Oroonoko*," *Comparative Drama* 42, no. 1 [2008]: 51–71, quote on 66n1); Rhoda Trooboff counts 261 performances of Southerne's *Oroonoko* before Hawkesworth's play debuted in 1759 ("Reproducing *Oroonoko*: A Case Study in Plagiarism, Textual Parallelism, and Creative Borrowing," in *Troping* Oroonoko *from Behn to Bandele*, 108–40, quote on 121–22); Iwanisziw counts 300 performances of Southerne's play during the eighteenth century ("The Eighteenth-Century Marketing of *Oroonoko*," 142).

[55] Basker suggests that this difference sometimes "can be inferred from the cast of characters or other details" ("Intimations of Abolitionism," 65n30), while Spencer notes that "it is possible for most

problem for reconstructing performance history with any degree of precision, it points to the cultural resonance of *Oroonoko* beyond discrete performances.[56] For the purposes of the eighteenth-century advertisements on which *The London Stage* is largely based, all of these plays are, in a sense, *Oroonoko*.

As the play resonates through its various adaptations and as its meanings shift for new audiences, what remains is a sense of its instability. Even after the December 1, 1759, playbill for Hawkesworth's *Oroonoko* attempted to regularize it by dubbing it "a Tragedy," future performances continued to be labeled "a Play" or lacked any generic label at all, indicating the play's continued resistance to categorization and the continuing appeal of the split-plot version. The label "a Play," then, is a way of registering not only the generic ambiguity of a specific performance, but of locating that performance within a larger cultural formation. *Oroonoko*'s genre doesn't calcify because the play itself doesn't calcify.

If we think about generic labels pinning down the form and meaning of a text, the absence of a consistent advertising practice for *Oroonoko* gets us nowhere. But as our study shows, the label can point not just to the arc of the plot, but the life of the play itself. Rather than signaling its place in the history of tragedy or tragicomedy, the designation "a Play" indicates how *Oroonoko* continued to carry its history of standing outside stable generic categories, even after adapters attempted to regularize it. Thus examining playbills at scale helps us to discern the interactions among popular knowledge, history, and performance as manifested in theatrical advertisements. The application of the insights gained at scale to the individual case study, in this case the advertising and critical phenomena surrounding *Oroonoko*, concretizes the varying levels of instability and stability that are documented in the playbills. More importantly, this case study shows how meanings emerge from the dataset that cannot be accessed at the level of the individual cultural object examined in isolation. Until we look at hundreds of playbills, the phrase "a Play" appears only as an empty signifier.

The relationship between the individual cultural object and the curated dataset is not a transparent one; the latter is rather a heavily mediated and discipline-specific representation of the former. Through the collection and curation of our own dataset we are acutely aware of the choices that went into its creation. The use of already curated datasets has other undeniable advantages: it may temper the influence of the researcher on his or her findings; furthermore, from a practical standpoint, it allows work to advance past the time-consuming labor of curation. While we would not suggest that researchers need to reinvent the wheel, we do advocate for a more explicit reflection on the relationship between the dataset and the objects it describes. Such reflection allows for a deeper resonance between digitally enabled research agendas and existing intellectual and disciplinary traditions. In our case the attention to the dataset as an abstraction of archival objects draws on insights from performance studies in order to respond to a long history of counting in theatre studies. This counting has often been conducted to positivistic ends: from Nicoll's counts of anonymous

entries to determine which version is being played. Cast-lists for Hawkesworth's version omit the comic characters and include reference to the 'Dance of Slaves,' while Gentleman's version is once identified as his under the title *The Royal Slave,* so that I have taken other performances at that same theatre under that title as his" (*Aphra Behn's Afterlife*, 254n66).

[56] Trooboff argues that *Oroonoko* became an "authorless legend" and "a circulating trope at the disposal of many authors" ("Reproducing *Oroonoko*," 121–22).

eighteenth-century plays to Lancashire's assertion that "[w]hen data elements are carefully delimited . . . into sequential fields, the computer can identify, for example, every actor with one role in one play by one playwright at a specific theater on a certain date."[57] Rather than seeking out the actuality of each performance indicated on the playbills, we reveal the shifting modes of categorization at work across the century. Our study further points to the need for the systematic digitization of archives from around the world, and moreover the rigorous and transparent documentation of the curation processes that such digitization involves.

While we agree with the central premise of distant reading or macroanalysis—that there are phenomena that can only be seen in the aggregate—we insist on rigorous theoretical attention to the objects of analysis and their transformation as they become data. We do not assume our dataset to be wholly neutral or objective. Our approach thus questions the assumptions that have characterized much work in quantitative literary and theatre studies. Such work has often relied upon the presumed ontological stability of the objects under analysis and the transparency of their representations as data in order to extrapolate them at scale. Our study shows the need to attend to the unstable ontologies present in cultural objects, as well as in the datasets that describe them. In this moment of ever-increasing "datafication" and quantification, it is more necessary than ever to step back and theorize the materials being digitized in order to attend to the specificity of the underlying objects, as well as the affordance of their digital remediations. Only by doing so can we resist the impulse toward data determinism and naïve quantification that threatens to strip humanities inquiry of its commitments to attend to mediation, situatedness, and ambiguity. Ultimately, approaches such as these are necessary to keep the digital humanities humanistic.

[57] See Nicoll, *Early Eighteenth Century Drama,* 8; and Ian Lancashire, "Records of Early English Drama and the Computer," *Computers and the Humanities* 12, nos. 1–2 (1978): 183–88, quote on 184.